

THE MISAPPLICATION OF THE MALAYAN  
COUNTERINSURGENCY MODEL TO THE  
STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM

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## ABSTRACT

THE MISAPPLICATION OF THE MALAYAN COUNTERINSURGENCY MODEL  
TO THE STRATEGIC HAMLET PROGRAM, by MAJ James M. Higgins,  
84 pages.

The strategic hamlet program in Vietnam was destined to failure because of a misapplication of the Malayan counterinsurgency model. The ethnic composition of the population, the nature of the insurgency, and the inherent capabilities of the bureaucracy created a unique set of conditions in Malaya. These conditions allowed the British colonial government to implement an effective counterinsurgency strategy that isolated the guerrillas. The focus of the strategy was the resettlement of the rural population away from the jungle. The South Vietnamese and their American and British advisers misapplied the Malayan strategy in the implementation of the strategic hamlet program. The program was designed to isolate the rural Vietnamese from the Viet Cong. The authorities, however, failed to understand how the conditions in South Vietnam differed from Malaya. The impact of these differences destined the program to failure. This thesis draws from primary sources written by personnel who were involved in both counterinsurgencies. It also outlines lessons learned from the misapplication that may be applied to future operations.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIDG	Civilian Irregular Defense Group
CIP	Counterinsurgency Plan
ICP	Indochinese Communist Party
IMCSH	Inter-Ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets
MAAG	Military Assistance Advisory Group
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
MCP	Malayan Communist Party
MOOTW	Military Operations Other Than War
MPAJA	Malayan Peoples Anti Japanese Army
MRLA	Malayan Races Liberation Army
NLF	National Liberation Front
NSC	National Security Council
TTP	Tactics, Techniques, And Procedures
UMNO	United Malay National Organization
VRL	Vietnamese Resistance League

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

"In assessing the situation in Vietnam, we had learnt three rules: nothing is what it seems; every statement or comment can be supported by evidence and is therefore true; and, as an extension of Murphy's Law, if the roof can fall in it will."<sup>1</sup> This prophetic quote is from Sir Robert Thompson, a British counterinsurgency expert, who fought communist guerrillas in Malaya. Thompson was the principal architect of the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam. The central theme of this program was to isolate the rural population from the insurgents through the establishment of secure villages. Thompson would see the roof fall in on that program with the death of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963.

This thesis will determine whether or not the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam was destined to failure because of a misapplication of the counterinsurgency strategy used in Malaya. The thesis will examine three subordinate questions. The first is, What were the implications of the differences in the rural populations, who were the targets for resettlement, in Malaya and Vietnam? The second question is, What were the differences between the insurgents in both countries? The third is, How were the resettlement programs influenced by the bureaucratic institutions in both countries? By examining these three areas, the author will answer the research question. Chapters 2 and 3 will provide a brief historical review of Malaya and Vietnam. Chapter 4 will examine how, and if, the Malayan model was applied in Vietnam. Chapter 5 will be an analysis of the application of the model using the subordinate questions as a guide. Chapter 6 will be the conclusion.



The author makes three assumptions in this thesis. The first is that the resettlement plan was the decisive element of the British counterinsurgency strategy in Malaya. The second is that the governments of South Vietnam and the United States viewed the British strategy as a model for operations against the Viet Cong. It is important to note that neither necessarily viewed it as the only model. The last assumption is that Thompson used this model as the basis for the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam.

One of the limitations of this thesis is that there may not be a way to quantifiably prove that the above model was formalized and used as the author assumes. The second limitation is that Sir Robert Thompson wrote most of the primary sources for the British Advisory Mission and they, therefore, present a rather biased view.

This thesis is not an in-depth study of the nature of both the Malayan and Vietnamese insurgencies. The subordinate questions previously stated will be viewed in the context of the research question. The author will look at military operations from both the government and insurgent perspectives in Malaya and Vietnam only as they pertain to the issue of resettlement. Likewise, a detailed review of the nature and policies of the British colonial and Diem governments is beyond the scope of this thesis. The author will focus on key policy issues and the bureaucratic structure in Malaya and South Vietnam to determine if the prerequisites were in place to administer a major resettlement program.

The author believes that this thesis is significant today in light of the increase in military operations other than war (MOOTW). There is a tendency to take the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) used in one operation and view them as a model that

can be applied to another. The author has personal experience with this while participating in the planning of operations for Bosnia and Kosovo. In the latter case, the staff had to make a continuous, conscious effort not to apply a model based on extensive experience in Bosnia. Many of the tactics and techniques used in Bosnia were applicable to Kosovo. Some, however, were not. The danger lies in grouping the lessons learned from one situation or forming a model and applying it in total to another situation. The thesis will look at the possibility that this is exactly what happened with the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam.

There are a number of primary and secondary sources available as research material for this thesis. The most obvious primary sources are three books by Sir Robert Thompson: *Make for the Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars*, *No Exit From Vietnam*, and *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*. These books provide detailed first-hand accounts of Thompson's experiences in Malaya and Vietnam. Thompson's accounts offer invaluable personal insights into the development of the strategic hamlet program and its eventual demise. However, these accounts should be viewed in light of Thompson's bias that the failure of the program rested solely with the US and Vietnamese governments.

Two other primary sources on the Malayan insurgency are Harry Miller's *A Short History of Malaysia* and Anthony Short's *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*. The former gives a good account of the role of ethnicity in the resettlement plan. The latter is a detailed account of the New Village Program in Malaya that includes some noteworthy failures not addressed by Thompson.

There are an overwhelming number of sources of information on the strategic hamlet program. One of the most detailed is Douglas Blaufarb's *The Counterinsurgency Era: U.S. Doctrine and Performance*. Blaufarb gives an in-depth review of the origin of the strategic hamlet program from a US point of view. He also addresses the role President Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, played in the implementation of the program. He lists some of the reasons the Vietnamese government wanted to expand the resettlement faster than Thompson wanted. Blaufarb cites several common explanations for the failure of the program, including the improper distribution of resources and inadequate interagency coordination. He also suggests that the underlying cause of the program's failure may have been that implementing it was beyond the ability of the Diem government.

Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army in Vietnam* highlights the Military Assistance and Advisory Group's planning effort before the implementation of the strategic hamlet program. He also details the American involvement in Operation Sunrise, the first application of the Strategic Hamlet program. Krepinevich places most of the blame for the program's failure squarely on the Diem regime. He cites over-inflated statistics, corrupt administrators, and a lack of unity and focus between the province and national authorities as examples the government's failure to implement the program.

*The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decisionmaking on Vietnam, The Senator Gravel Edition* is also a key source of documents and statistics concerning the development and implementation of the program. It tends to balance Thompson's personal opinions by showing the US perspective. These papers include notes on meetings between key American officials and Sir Robert

Thompson. The five-volume set gives an assessment of the program's failure from the point of view of more than one agency.

The author will use the above sources to determine if the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam was destined for failure because of a misapplication of the Malayan counterinsurgency model.

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Thompson, *Make For The Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars* (London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1989), 143.

## CHAPTER 2

### MALAYA BACKGROUND

This chapter is a brief historical review of Malaya in the post World War II environment. The author's intent is to establish a common understanding of some key facts and events that influenced the Malayan insurgency, known as the Emergency, and subsequent government response. While this review is not exhaustive, it will provide a framework with which to examine the thesis statement.

Malaya is a small country on a peninsula forming the southern most point of the Asian mainland. Bordered to the north by Thailand, it is only 400 miles long and 200 miles wide at its widest point. The dominant terrain feature is a 300-mile long mountain range running down the middle of the country. Covered in dense jungle with few inhabitants, the mountains effectively separate east and west Malaya. There were few roads that crossed the mountain chain and there were only two north/south rail lines in the whole country.

The geography was a key factor in the population dispersion (figure 1). In 1947, there were 4,908,000 people in Malaya. Of these, only 15.1 percent lived in urban areas. The population was concentrated in the south and the northwest. The Malays had a small upper or aristocratic class and a small but growing middle class; however, most were rural, agricultural peasants.<sup>1</sup> Ethnically, Malaya can be divided into three groups. The majority were Malays who were Muslim. The second ethnic group was the Chinese who were the largest minority. They were involved in commerce, in industry as a labor force, and many maintained close ties to the Chinese mainland. Indians, mostly Tamils, were

the second largest minority. They worked in the rubber plantations and they maintained strong ties to their homeland.

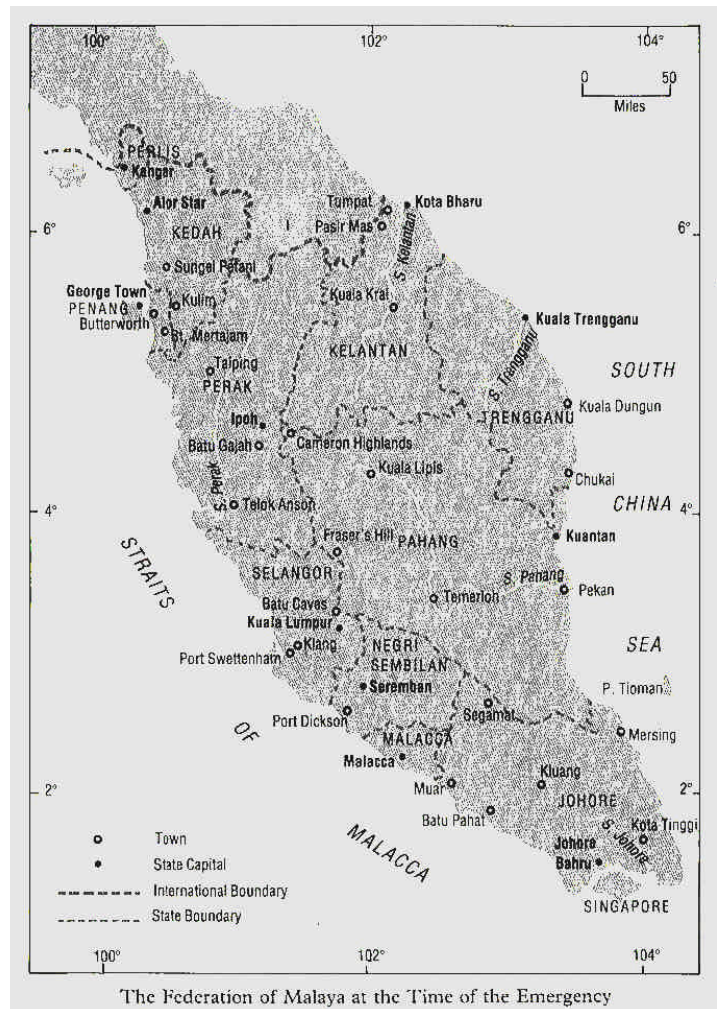


Figure 1. The Federation of Malaya. Source: Donald Mackay, *The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960: The Domino That Stood* (Washington: Brassey's Ltd.), xvii.

The Chinese and Indian workers were vital to the two sources of Malaya's wealth, rubber and tin. When tin and rubber sources were discovered, a huge demand was created for cheap, unskilled labor. The Malays were generally unwilling to fill these jobs, preferring to remain on their kampongs (rural villages). This fueled the immigration of Chinese and Indian workers to fill the labor shortage.

In order to govern the colony and better profit from its resources, the British recognized the sovereignty of the Malayan Sultanates. Singapore, Penang, and Malacca were protectorates of the crown. The remaining territory was divided into nine states. Four of these were federated with a central government in Kuala Lumpur. Each state and colony had its own Prime Minister, known as a Mentri Besar. Most real power remained with the colonial government who exercised its influence in each state and colony through the British Resident. This was a source of constant friction between the Malay state and the colonial governments. To complicate matters, few Chinese and Indians were citizens of Malaya, even though they formed a significant percentage of the population. Consequently, they did not have effective political representation or power before the war.<sup>2</sup>

This was the situation when the Japanese invaded Malaya through Thailand in 1941. British forces retreated and the citizens of Malaya were left alone to face occupation. The Japanese made a clear distinction between the ethnic groups. They favored the Malays and left the Sultans in power. The Japanese used the established bureaucracy to control the country. They also exploited the tin and rubber industry to support the war effort. They pressured many Indians into joining pro-Japanese Indian military units to fight the British. It was, however, the Chinese who fared the worst

during the occupation.<sup>3</sup> The Japanese viewed them as extensions of the Kuomintang forces they were fighting in China. The occupiers also knew that it was the Chinese who were controlling the resistance movement.

The resistance movement began when it became clear that the Japanese were going to occupy Malaya and the British could not stop them. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP), under instructions from China to cooperate with the British, became the nucleus for resistance.<sup>4</sup> The MCP can trace its roots back to the 1920 World Congress of the Comintern when they adopted a broader platform designed to attract Malays and Indians. Despite this, it remained from its inception through the Emergency an overwhelmingly Chinese organization. Prior to the war the MCP was an illegal party but they provided the only intact organization around which to build and maintain a resistance. They received some hurried training from the British and then moved into the jungles to take up the fight. The MCP attracted new recruits and supporters primarily from the displaced Chinese who fled the Japanese. These “squatters” lived in small family oriented farming communities on the edge of the jungle.

The MCP leader before, during, and immediately after the war was a Vietnamese named Loi Tak. Under his direction, the MCP formed the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA).<sup>5</sup> The MCP exercised command and control of the MPAJA through regional commands. This was a cumbersome system and the small resistance groups spent a good deal of time deep in the jungle awaiting the call to action. During this time, the MCP members gave political instruction to the non-communist members. Thus, explaining the influence the MCP, although never the majority of the MPAJA, retained over the organization.<sup>6</sup>



The MCP and MPAJA remained viable organizations throughout the war despite receiving only limited support from the British until the closing months of the war. The MCP did, however, have some grievous security lapses. During one of these lapses, almost all senior MPAJA cadres were killed, except Loi Tak, when the Japanese attacked a secret meeting location.<sup>7</sup> During the occupation, the MPAJA demonstrated several traits that would be seen again during the Emergency. The first is that a small corps of dedicated party members tried to exercise command and control of the MPAJA through an inefficient communications network. The second is that almost all of the support for the resistance would come from Chinese squatters through what was known as the Min Yuen, Chinese for “Masses Organization,” the support arm of the insurgency. Lastly, the MPAJA would normally use disciplined, proper behavior when dealing with the squatters, but it would also resort to terrorism and coercion to control them when required.<sup>8</sup>

The British were quick to reoccupy their former colony of Malaya in force after World War II. When Britain returned to its former colonies, they found native populations whose outlook had changed during the time spent under Japanese control. The citizens of Malaya had seen another Asian race defeat their European colonial masters. Any idea of European invincibility was gone. Additionally, Malaya had an active resistance organization, in which the Communist party played a leading role during the war.<sup>9</sup> The British soon discovered that a great deal had changed while they were gone.

In 1945 following the Japanese surrender, the British demobilized the MPAJA. The British government under Prime Minister Attlee had a long-term goal of

independence for Malaya. In light of this, the colonial government recognized the MCP as a legitimate party. The British plan was to create a single state of Malaya with Singapore still being a colony, a plan known as the Malayan Union. The plan would strip away the last vestiges of the Sultans' power and expand the definition of citizenship to include the Chinese and Indians.

This Malayan Union caused an immediate uproar when announced by the British government in March 1946. The Malays formed the United Malay National Organization (UMNO) a powerful political party founded to oppose the Union. One of the most volatile issues was that giving citizenship to the Chinese and Indians would make the Malaysians a minority in their own country. Not surprisingly, the MCP was strongly in favor of the Union. After the war, the MCP sought to gain independence through indirect means. They infiltrated the labor unions and sought to cause civil unrest and dissatisfaction with the colonial government.<sup>10</sup> By 1947, the MCP controlled the largest labor organization in Malaya. The MPAJA was demobilized but former members still met through various organizations sponsored by the MCP. The MCP, however, was rife with internal dissent. The central committee began to disagree with Loi Tak and some of the labor unions began to ignore calls to strike by the MCP. The British were beginning to see that UMNO was stronger and more effective than the MCP and abandoned the Malayan Union plan.

In March 1947, an event took place that brought the MCP to the brink of ruin. Loi Tak missed a meeting of the Central Committee. It was soon discovered that he had left the country and disappeared with a large portion of the Party's funds. Worse yet, it was also discovered that he had been on both the Japanese and British payrolls.<sup>11</sup> The

party named Chin Peng, an ethnic Chinese, as the new Secretary General of the MCP, but the damage was done. The MCP ceased to be an effective political force in Malayan politics.

This cleared the way for the British to announce the Federation of Malaya Plan in May 1947. The new plan called for the Federation of nine original states plus Penang and Malacca with a central government in Kuala Lumpur. The states would remain sovereign and retain significant autonomy. The central government would be in charge of legal matters, defense, and other key areas. Citizenship laws were stricter and continued to exclude many Chinese and Indians. Singapore would remain a separate British colony. The plan was enacted in February 1948.

The MCP remained decisively engaged in an internal examination during most of this time. The results of the review blamed the MCP's failure to stop the Federation plan on Loi Tak's deceit. The party vowed that the future would be different.<sup>12</sup> In early 1948, the party line became increasingly militant and anti-British. While there was no single cause for the MCP's adoption of violent tactics in 1948, there were a number of contributing factors. The enactment of the Malayan Federation, with its strict citizenship laws, raised Malayan-Chinese tensions. Chin Peng may have gotten mixed signals in correspondence with Chou En Lai on the issue of open revolution. Also, in February 1948, the Calcutta Congress of the Communist Party of India met with numerous international representatives in attendance. These included a representative from Moscow, the Tito government, and the Australian Communist Party. The MCP could have interpreted some of the speeches made at the Congress as a call for revolution.<sup>13</sup>

The fifth Plenary Session of the MCP Central Committee began to call for the eventual overthrow of British Imperialism.<sup>14</sup> It was not a general call to arms, but it set the condition for revolution. By May 1948, the MCP began to recall the members of the MPAJA, in order to equip and train them. The MPAJA was renamed the Malayan Races Liberation Army (MRLA). The number of armed conflicts between radical Chinese and the British increased in May and early June. The decisive event was on 16 June 1948 when three British and two Chinese civilians were murdered. Sir Edward Gent, the High Commissioner of the Federation of Malay, declared a state of emergency in Malaya on 18 June 1948.

The government did not initially understand the nature of the insurgency. They viewed the communists as criminals and felt that the first order of business was to simply destroy the MCP. The Malayan security service underestimated the strength of the insurgents and the wide support they enjoyed among the Chinese. The British Security Service also did not appreciate the role it should have filled as the lead intelligence agency.<sup>15</sup> This led to an intelligence failure that lasted for years and hampered the government's ability to be proactive in fighting the MCP.

The government was also under extreme pressure from the European plantation and mine owners to take aggressive action against the guerrillas. Throughout the early part of the Emergency, these landowners and their employers lived on the front line of the insurgency and were prime targets for the MRLA. In response to their demands and increasing MLP violence, the government gave the police extraordinary powers of arrest and detention. Curfews were instituted throughout the country and suspects were arrested, including MCP members who did not get the word to move into the jungle.

The military, under Major General C. H. Boucher, the General Officer Commanding (GOC), responded to the crisis with large-scale sweeps of the jungle by brigade size elements. The sweeps were ineffective mainly due to poor intelligence and because the MRLA simply avoided the army patrols.

Gent was recalled because of the ineffective colonial government response. He died in a plane crash returning to England on 4 July 1948 and his replacement, Sir Henry Gurney, did not reach Malaya until 6 October 1948. In the interim, the situation deteriorated further as the MRLA, supported by the Min Yuen, increased the level of violence.

One of the first actions Gurney took, as High Commissioner, was to make the police the lead agent for defeating the insurgency. This was not a drastic change from the previous approach but served to highlight the lack of cooperation between the army and the police. Major General Boucher resented the implication that his service would play a supporting role and, as a result, interagency cooperation continued to decline.<sup>16</sup> The police, under Commissioner Colonel W. N. Gray, were woefully undermanned and under-equipped to take on the task.

Although the situation for the government looked grim in the beginning of 1949, there was a bright spot. High Commissioner Gurney enforced the National Registration Regulation.<sup>17</sup> Enacted in September 1948, the regulation required all persons over 12 years of age to register with the government and to carry picture identification with them at all times. There were stiff penalties on anyone caught without the card. The MCP tried to stop the process employing some of the most violent tactics seen so far in the insurgency. Although they did manage to interrupt registration at several locations and

frequently forced Chinese workers to burn their cards, the government was ultimately successful because of Gurney's strong influence. This success would provide the basis for subsequent population control measures.

Significant changes occurred to both sides in the Emergency in 1950. For the government, the most important was the arrival of Lieutenant General Sir Harold Briggs who filled the newly created post of Director of Operations. The post was created with Gurney's backing in a further attempt to coordinate police and military efforts. Although, the GOC, now Major General Roy Urquhart, and the police commissioner reported to Briggs, the Director's authority was far from absolute. The success Briggs achieved is largely due to the force of his personality.

After conducting a tour of the country, Briggs issued a written report of his impressions on April 10, 1950. This document laid out the government's strategy and provided the framework that with later modifications became known as the "Briggs Plan."<sup>18</sup> Briggs established his first priority as improving military and police cooperation. A key element in this was the establishment of the Federal War Council. The Council, consisting of the Director of Operations, the GOC, and the Police Commissioner, among others, met regularly to determine policy and coordinate activities. Briggs directed that similar councils be established down to the district level. The effect was not a cure all, but went a long way in establishing a unity of effort.

Briggs also borrowed from an earlier government staff paper and stressed the need for a resettlement plan for the Chinese squatters. This idea was formalized in January 1949 in the Report of the Committee to Investigate the Squatter Problem. The report recognized that the squatters were a significant source of support for the Min Yuen

and the MRLA. It recommended they be resettled away from the jungle's edge, separating the Chinese from MCP influence. The report also said the squatters should be given the title to the resettled land and it placed the financial burden for the program on the states. Consequently, the Malayan state governments were less than enthusiastic in implementing the program. By the time Briggs arrived, only 18,5000 squatters had been resettled.<sup>19</sup>

Briggs brought the resettlement program under the colonial government control and funding in June 1950 and the results were dramatic. From 1 June 1950 until 30 April 1951, approximately 8,000 people in Johore alone were resettled each month. By December 1951, 385,000 people were resettled throughout the country and the figure reached more than 570,000 by the end of 1954.<sup>20</sup> The resettlement areas came to be known as New Villages. The program was not, however, without problems. Many of the home guard units, made up of resettled Chinese, were initially inadequately trained and equipped to provide for their own local defense. This meant they were still susceptible to the MRLA and Min Yuen infiltration. The police also had difficulty securing their area of responsibility between the camps and at the edge of the jungle.

Although the lack of security allowed the Min Yuen to infiltrate many camps and continue to intimidate workers, the resettlement program was limiting the insurgents' food supplies. The logistics of moving the food became more difficult with the New Villages removed from the jungle's edge. In response, the MRLA stepped up their operations. Violent insurgent incidents rose from 1,442 in 1949 to 4,739 in 1950 and peaked at 6,082 in 1951.<sup>21</sup> The MCP, however, was not successful in derailing the resettlement program.

The MCP received two morale boosts in 1950. The first was Britain's recognition of Chairman Mao's China in January. The second was the outbreak of the Korean War on 25 June 1950. The MCP hailed both of these as welcome signs of impending Communist expansion worldwide. This was especially true when Chinese forces entered the Korean War. The MCP was able to increase its numbers in the early 1950s as recruits, mainly poor Chinese, went into the jungle to join what seemed to be the winning side. The MCP strength reached 8,000 to 10,000 in the early 1950s.<sup>22</sup>

The Korean War proved to be a double-edged sword for the MCP. As the war progressed, demand for rubber and tin, Malaya's major exports, rose dramatically as did their price. Rubber rose from \$0.40 per pound in 1949 to a high of \$2.20 per pounds in February 1951. The price of tin also went up, doubling between 1950 and 1951.<sup>23</sup> The effect of this increase was threefold. First, the boom increased mine and plantation owners' profits. This allowed them to open new areas and hire more workers. The owners used profits to establish secure areas on the plantations and mine sites for their workers to live. The second effect was that hourly wages for skilled and unskilled laborers increased with owner profit. This attracted labor from the New Villages. This labor force, unemployed after the resettlement and the decreased availability of farmland, began to receive disposable income for the first time. The third effect was that increased income and profits gave the government more money through taxes. Prior to the government taking over resettlement, less than \$2 million had been spent on the New Villages. By the end of 1951, that figure was more than \$40 million.<sup>24</sup> The government also increased spending on the police and public works, increasing the effectiveness of both..



The combined effect on the MCP was significant. Although the insurgents were avoiding the continuing army sweeps and had infiltrated many New Villages, the same people they were recruiting and needed support from were fading away. The communist message was not registering with families who were making good money for the first time. Additionally, the level of security in the country paralleled the increased government expenditures. The MCP began to realize that it was not winning the war with armed actions. As a result, in October 1951, the MCP issued the “October Manifesto” which directed that the political struggle, lead by the Min Yuen, would be equal to the military. The party also admitted some of its more violent tactics used to coerce support from the population were inappropriate. In the future MRLA and Min Yuen commanders would have to employ tactics that wouldn’t alienate potential supporters.<sup>25</sup>

Word of this change would take some time to filter down the ranks. Poor communication was a systemic problem that plagued the MCP throughout the Emergency. The MRLA and the Min Yuen were both highly decentralized by design. They were to split into even smaller elements based on a shortage of food. There were also few radios available, and the primary means of communication was through courier. It took almost a year on average for central committee decisions to reach rank and file.<sup>26</sup> A direct result of this was that small unit leaders worked on old guidance and their efforts were not coordinated.

An example of this was the killing of High Commissioner Gurney in an ambush on 6 October 1951. It is unclear whether Gurney was targeted or simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Regardless, the murder had consequences that the MCP could

not have anticipated. That action combined with the election of a conservative British government in October 1951 set the stage for a new, more effective government effort.

The new British Colonial Secretary, Oliver Lyttleton, decided that the military and police efforts were still disjointed. He decided to expand the power of the High Commissioner giving him direct authority over both agencies. Prior to this, the army still received orders from the Far East Commander. A new post was also created; the Deputy High Commissioner was charged with running the government on a daily basis, thus allowing the High Commissioner to concentrate on the Emergency. The man they chose for the top post of High Commissioner was General Sir Gerald Templer.

Templer assumed the post, as well as Director of Operations, on 7 February 1952. He brought with him a clear mandate in the form of a government directive. The directive had three main points. The first was that Malaya would become a self-governing nation. The second point, aimed at achieving Chinese and Indian support for the government, addressed common citizenship upon independence. The third point was that in order to achieve the first two, the insurgency must be defeated. In addition to the directive, Templer, a cabinet appointee approved personally by Churchill, had clear government backing.

The High Commissioner brought a new level of energy to match his unprecedented authority. Templer elevated the post of Director of Intelligence to the same level as the GOC and the Police Commissioner. He worked closely with the Police Commissioner in streamlining an overly large and inefficient force. Templer helped change the military focus from the large sweeps favored by Boucher and Briggs to more aggressive small unit actions. Templer continued the momentum of the resettlement

program and strengthened the Home Guard through better training and equipment. The passage of the Village Councils Ordinance in May 1952 allowed the New Villages the right to elect their own administrators. This ordinance was not an immediate success but it was an important step toward eventual independence.

One of the most effective and controversial tactics Templer used was using food as a means to control the population. Under his guidance, strict rationing measures were implemented in areas where the insurgents were active. These measures included searches to prevent workers leaving the New Villages from bringing food, including lunch, off of the settlements. In some cases, the government took outright control of all food products. In extreme cases, security forces would close stores and confiscate food. They would then set up and supervise communal kitchens as the only authorized places to prepare and get food. These measures alienated many Chinese and some people in Britain as well. However, they were also extremely effective in cutting off food supplies to the insurgents.<sup>27</sup>

On the political front, the MCP suffered another blow in 1952 when the Malaya UMNO party joined with Malayan Chinese Association to win municipal elections in Kuala Lumpur. The alliance became formal in 1953 and later expanded to include the Malayan Indian Congress. The significance was twofold. First, Malaysians, Chinese, and Indians participated in municipal elections for the first time. Secondly, the alliance gave the Chinese a viable means to express their discontent with the colonial government. Prior to this, the MCP had been their only outlet. This fact coupled with more aggressive government actions and a healthy economy spelled doom for the insurgency. The mechanisms necessary for eventual independence were coming into place.

The MCP though was not yet defeated. There were an estimated 6,000 MRLA members supported by 10,000 to 15,000 Min Yuen. The insurgents were, however, being pushed further and further into the jungle by increasingly, effective security force patrols now supported by helicopters. The MRLA were also forced to grow their own food to survive, which made it easier for the government to find and destroy them. The MCP recognizing the gravity of the situation issued a partial reversal of the “October Manifesto” in October 1952. The new guidance was for the MRLA leaders to be more aggressive and to return to their earlier violent tactics. They were free to disregard the potential impacts on the civilian population in order to regain the initiative.<sup>28</sup> It was, however, too late.

The effectiveness of the government and Templer’s efforts became apparent in September 1953 when the first “white area” was declared. In order to be declared a white area, the area had to be free of insurgent activities and there had to be an effective civil government in place that was supported by the local population.<sup>29</sup> The government systematically stepped down its restrictions and presence, eventually leaving administration and defense to locally elected officials. The benefits for the inhabitants were apparent and it was yet another step towards independence. As more white areas were declared the insurgents became more isolated and the army could concentrate more forces against them.

By the time Templer left in May 1954, it was apparent that the government was winning the war. Although there were still problems with the New Villages such as filling administrative positions and providing medical care, the potential for self-

government and declaration as a white area provided the promise for a better future. The MCP could offer no such promise.

The death knell for the MCP came in July 1955 when the Alliance Party won the majority of seats in the national election. The top position in the new government, Chief Minister, went to Tunku Abdul Rahman. He immediately brought pressure on the British colonial government to grant independence. Chin Peng recognized the futility of his party's promises to free Malaya from colonial oppression in the face of impending independence. He sought and obtained a meeting with Abdul Rahman in December 1955. Chin Peng offered to cease hostilities in return for general amnesty and recognition of the MCP as a legitimate political party. It was the MCP leader's open recognition that he had no chance of winning the insurgency. His hope was to live to fight another day.<sup>30</sup> Abdul Rahman recognized the offer for what it was and rejected it. The conflict would continue with the Malaysians guaranteed independence and the insurgents guaranteed failure.

Malaya achieved independence on 31 August 1957. Although the Emergency would not end officially until 30 July 1960, the MCP had long since ceased to be a threat to either government. The insurgency would fade away rather than go down in a blaze of glory.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Mackay, *The Malayan Emergency, 1948-1960: The Domino That Stood* (Washington: Brassey's Ltd.), 7.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Thompson, *Make for the Hills: Memories of Far Eastern Wars* (London: Leo Cooper Ltd., 1989), 79-80.

<sup>3</sup> Mackay, 12.

121. <sup>4</sup>Wang Gungwu, *Malaysia: A Survey* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965),
- <sup>5</sup>Mackay, 19.
- <sup>6</sup>Short, 23.
- <sup>7</sup>Mackay, 24.
- <sup>8</sup>Short, 24-25.
- <sup>9</sup>Mackay, 20.
- <sup>10</sup>Mackay, 20.
- <sup>11</sup>Thompson, *Make for the Hills*, 50.
- <sup>12</sup>Mackay, 26.
- <sup>13</sup>Short, 43-49.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 55-57.
- <sup>15</sup>Richard Stubbs, Hearts and Minds in Guerrilla Warfare: The Malayan Emergency 1948-1960 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 67.
- <sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.
- <sup>17</sup>Mackay, 64.
- <sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 88.
- <sup>19</sup>Stubbs, 101.
- <sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 102.
- <sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.
- <sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 108.
- <sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.
- <sup>25</sup>Mackay, 115.

<sup>26</sup>Lucian W. Pye, *Guerilla Communism in Malaya: Its Social and Political Meaning* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 100.

<sup>27</sup>Stubbs, 167.

<sup>28</sup>Mackay, 188.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

## CHAPTER 3

### VIETNAM BACKGROUND

This chapter provides an overview of Vietnam focusing on the presidency of Ngo Dinh Diem, from 1954 to 1963. The author will cover the geography of the country and provide a brief historical background. The intent is to establish a framework with which to understand the situation in South Vietnam under the government of President Diem. The author will show that the strategic hamlet program evolved to become the centerpiece of the national counterinsurgency strategy, accepted by both the South Vietnamese and American governments. The chapter will conclude with the death of Diem in 1963 and the abandonment of the strategic hamlet program by his successor.

South Vietnam contained 66,000 square miles that could be divided into three geographic regions (figure 2). The first was the fertile Mekong River Delta. This extensively cultivated area was home to the capital, Saigon, as well as, the majority of the population. The second area was known as Chaine Annamitique, or more commonly, the Central Highlands. It was made up of a rugged mountain chain that ran south from North Vietnam. The southern part of the chain contained a large plain that was home to a small part of the population. The last geographic area was the Central Lowlands that ran along the east side of the mountain chain and bordered the sea. This land was fertile as well and supported the second largest population density.





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Figure 2. Vietnam Veteran's Homepage, "Map of Indochina" Map online; available from <http://grunt.space.swri.edu/visit/maps/mapE.jpg>; Internet; accessed 29 March 2001.

South Vietnamese population estimates vary from less than 12,000,000 in 1956 to 14,237,874 in 1963. The population was 80 percent Buddhist and roughly 10 percent Catholic and it could be divided into several ethnic groups. The largest group was the ethnic Vietnamese who comprised 80 percent of the population. The largest minority was the Chinese, roughly 10 percent of the population, who were heavily involved in all aspects of commerce and were concentrated in urban areas. The next largest minority were the Montagnards, comprised of more than 30 tribes who lived in the central highlands. Many of these tribes claimed lands that crossed the Laotian and Cambodian borders. The Montagnards were primarily subsistence farmers, as well as hunters and gatherers, living apart from other ethnic groups. The last large ethnic group was the Khmer who were related to the Cambodians. The Khmer were primarily farmers living in the southwest part of the country.

The economy was 75 percent agricultural, supported by rich farmland and a large rural population. Rice was the main crop and South Vietnam could produce a surplus. The problem, however, was distribution. The poor roads, subject to insurgent attack, the lack of a viable rail network, and the concentration of navigable waterways in the South frequently led to food shortages in other parts of the country. Another economic and social issue was that 2.5 percent of the population owned 50 percent of the land.<sup>1</sup> This inequity was a source of internal discontent, frequently exploited by the Viet Cong.

The South Vietnamese economy was the beneficiary of substantial US aid. Between 1955 and 1961, the Americans gave more than \$1 billion in military and economic aid to South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> This aid shored up a shaky economy that was

recovering from the French Indochina War, which had been settled by the Geneva Accords.

Vietnam formally became a colony of France in 1884 when China surrendered the Imperial Seal of Vietnam to the French. This completed colonization of French Indochina. The French divided Vietnam into three semiautonomous regions. Hanoi was the capital of Tonkin in the north. Hue was the capital of Annam in the central region. Saigon was the capital of Cochin China in the south.

Early in its history Vietnam fought for independence from Chinese domination. The Chinese occupied the country for long periods of time during which a number of Vietnamese emerged as national heroes leading insurgent movements to oust the occupying forces. This strong desire for independence continued during the French occupation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Communist Party, which emerged as the leading force for independence in the 1940s, traced its roots to a man who would become the greatest national hero. In 1919, an unknown Vietnamese named Nguyen Ai Quoc interrupted the Versailles Peace Conference petitioning for Vietnamese independence. The principals at the Conference ignored the petition and Quoc soon joined the French Communist Party. From Paris, he went to Moscow to study communism first hand.

In 1924, Quoc returned to Vietnam under instruction from Moscow to start a communist organization. The next year he founded the Revolutionary Youth League that would evolve into the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in 1930. In 1933, after allying with a Trotskyite group, the ICP won the majority of seats in the Saigon municipal

election. By 1935, after adopting a more moderate platform in order to attract a wider support base, the ICP became the strongest anti-French party in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

The ICP continued to act as a legal party until the outset of WWII. The Vichy French government that came to power after the fall of France in 1940 maintained control of the colonies. Japan wanted to occupy Vietnam in order to exploit her natural resources and to stop any support for the Chinese army coming from the south. The Japanese, however, could not invade Vietnam without the risk of upsetting the alliance with Germany. The Nazis needed a neutral Vichy government to prevent French colonial forces from supporting the British. Instead, the Japanese and Germans pressured the Vichy colonial government into a series of agreements that resulted in complete Japanese control by July 1941. The French colonial administration and a small military force were allowed to remain in place to take care of routine matters but the Japanese were clearly in charge of the country.

In May 1941, Quoc chaired the party conference that created the communist resistance organization known by its shortened name, Vietminh. The group was controlled by the communists but included nationalists as well. The Vietnamese Resistance League (VRL) was the most powerful nationalist resistance group. The VRL felt threatened by the growing strength of the Vietminh and had Quoc arrested by the Chinese Nationalist Army. The Vietminh went into hiding leaving the resistance effort to the VRL. The latter were ineffective and Quoc secured his release by offering the Chinese Nationalist Forces the assistance of the Vietminh. Upon release, Quoc changed his name to Ho Chi Minh “he who enlightens”. The Vietminh came out of hiding,

became the leading resistance organization, and began to receive US support. In April 1945, Vo Nguyen Giap assumed command of the Vietminh military forces.

In the closing months of the war, the Japanese installed Prince Bao Dai as the figurehead Emperor of Vietnam and Japan assumed full control of all of the government apparatus. While this was occurring, the Vietminh were rapidly becoming the dominant force among the resistance groups by incorporating nationalism into their ideology. When the Japanese surrendered in August 1945, the Vietminh assumed control of the country. The transition was relatively peaceful and on September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh issued the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence modeled after the United States' document.

Ho Chi Minh hoped that the United States would recognize the legitimacy of his new government. The results of the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945 would shatter these hopes. In order to put off a final decision on the status of Vietnam, the Allies agreed on a temporary solution. The British would occupy Vietnam south of the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel to disarm the Japanese and to maintain control until French forces arrived. Chinese Nationalist Forces would occupy the area north of the 16<sup>th</sup> parallel.

The French wasted no time in getting forces into South Vietnam to reinforce the small colonial garrison. The French assumed control from the British and went to work to unseat the Vietminh. The French began to systematically clear the south of Vietminh influence.<sup>4</sup> The United States did not support the French actions but did not interfere. The United States' attention was clearly focused on Europe and needed France as an ally. In the north, Ho Chi Minh consolidated power and tried to help the Vietminh in the south. Ho was elected president of a coalition government in January 1946.

Throughout 1946, Ho Chi Minh negotiated with the French Colonial Government, arranging the withdrawal of the Chinese forces and their subsequent replacement with French troops. Ho Chi Minh feared the Chinese presence, as their previous occupation had lasted for 1000 years. The French presence was supposed to be temporary while both sides negotiated the issues of reunification and eventual independence. However, the agreements and negotiations fell through and the French occupation became more violent. After a dispute over control of the Haiphong Harbor in November 1946, the French shelled the area killing 6000 people. This was the beginning of the French Indo-China War.

The bulk of the fighting during the war took place in north and central Vietnam. This was a result of the Vietminh power base in the northern mountains and the French desire to control Hanoi and the lines of communication to the south. In December 1949, elements of Mao's communist army began to arrive at the Chinese-North Vietnamese border. This was significant for two reasons. First, it gave the Vietminh a sanctuary to retreat to where the French would not pursue them for fear of involving China directly in the struggle. Second, the Vietminh began to receive training and equipment from the Chinese communists. This also gave the war a decidedly eastern communist versus western democratic tone.<sup>5</sup> Within three months, the Chinese, Soviet Union, and Eastern Bloc nations recognized Ho Chi Minh's government. China began to provide direct military aid.

On 27 February 1950, the United States National Security Council (NSC) held its first meeting devoted solely to Vietnam. The French had reinstalled Bao Dai as head of state in December 1949 and the United States recognized his government in early

February 1950. The NSC decided to support South Vietnam by funneling money through the French.

The Vietminh, under General Giap's leadership, became increasingly effective and began to defeat the French and South Vietnamese forces regularly. By 1954, the United States was funding almost 75 percent of the cost of the war. The final French defeat occurred at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954. General Giap was able to mass over two divisions supported by artillery and to destroy the French despite stiff resistance. President Dwight Eisenhower considered several means of intervention to save the French but decided the situation was beyond salvage.<sup>6</sup>

The battle ended as the Geneva Conference moved from discussions on Korea to the situation in Vietnam. After negotiations, France and North Vietnam signed a cease-fire treaty on July 20, 1954. Significantly, neither the US nor South Vietnam were signatories. The cease-fire required a withdrawal of all forces to their respective sides of the newly established border at the 17th parallel. This border created the two independent states of North and South Vietnam. In addition to repositioning military forces, citizens of each state were allowed to move to the other country. This "regroupment" would last 300 days. An election to determine whether the two nations would unify was to be held two years after the signing under the supervision of an international monitoring team.

July 1954 was also significant because Ngo Dinh Diem became Premier of South Vietnam. Diem was a well-educated, devout Catholic, who had served in the civil administration. In the early 1930s he resigned as Minister of the Interior after a dispute with the French colonial government. Diem stayed out of public life, resisting

communist and nationalist efforts to recruit him. After World War II, he traveled to the US and met such influential figures as Senator John Kennedy and Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York. This backing helped Diem secure the position as the most powerful man in South Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

Diem would need American help to stay in power. Colonel Edward Lansdale, working for the CIA office in Saigon, foiled a military coup against Diem in October 1954. In December of that year, the US began giving aid directly to the South Vietnamese Army, bypassing the French whose role in the country was rapidly diminishing. Between March and April 1955, Diem survived and crushed an uprising by the Binh Xuyen, a heavily armed, organized crime syndicate, who controlled much of Saigon. Buoyed by this victory, Diem attacked and defeated the militantly independent Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, each having a substantial military force. Although President Diem was beginning to consolidate his power, the limitations of his administration were becoming apparent.

Diem refused to hold unification elections as required by the Geneva accords. He realized that the communists had established firm control of North Vietnam and could mobilize its population, larger than South Vietnam's, to vote for unification. The US supported this decision in order to prevent a communist electoral victory that would unify both halves of the country under Ho. After securing independence by avoiding the election, Diem began to consolidate power in the country with either himself or his brother Ngo Dinh Nhu. Diem's political party was the National Revolutionary Movement. It was the only effective party in the country and was controlled by Nhu and Diem's other brother, Ngo Dinh Can. Nhu also headed the Secret Revolutionary



Personalist Labor Party, commonly known as Can Lao. The Can Lao was not a political party but was made up of ardent Diem loyalists. The 20,000 members were carefully chosen and placed in key positions within the civil bureaucracy and military. The loyalists provided political intelligence to Nhu and also attempted to spread Diem's philosophy of personalism throughout the government.<sup>8</sup> This philosophy will be examined further in chapter 5. Nhu controlled the Social and Political Research Service, which was a secret police organization that was feared throughout the nation. The Service collected intelligence on the South Vietnamese citizens ranging from military and political officials to intellectuals and students.<sup>9</sup> The organizations created an atmosphere of fear and mistrust among the educated population. In employing these secret organizations, Diem was in effect ensuring the short-term survival of his administration at the expense of alienating his country's educated class.

This feeling of alienation from the government was also found in the countryside. During the regroupment period, an estimated 1 million people left North Vietnam and fled south. This included over 60 percent of the north's 1.5 million Catholics. The sight of so many refugees caused an outpouring of sympathy and support in the US. It also exacerbated an already difficult land distribution problem. Diem resettled many of the refugees in the Central Highlands, thus angering the Montagnards. Others stayed in refugee camps while the government decided what to do with them. The US advisors knew that land reform would have to take place in order for Diem to get any legitimate popular support. Diem, however, did not want to alienate the large landowners, including the Catholic Church, who represented much of his support base. He knew that the discontented population would be an easy target for the Vietminh and he resolved to

strengthen his hold over them. He removed the village officials elected by the rural population and replaced them with his own loyal men. By Vietnamese tradition, the village enjoyed a large degree of autonomy in day-to-day affairs. By replacing the village officials, Diem not only made the system more inefficient, he alienated the very people he sought to control.<sup>10</sup> The alienation of the rural population was a significant factor in limiting Diem's base of popular support.

Indeed President Diem found himself trapped by his own mistrust. Having survived attempted military coups early in his presidency and again in 1960, Diem was always suspicious of the military. He appointed and promoted senior personnel on the basis of perceived loyalty rather than demonstrated competence. This policy, combined with centralized decision making, was designed to prevent the rise of any potential rivals from the ranks of the military.

Diem further attempted to eliminate rival power bases by placing the military at odds with the provincial administration. The province chiefs were appointed by Diem and controlled the paramilitary Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps. The latter were organized as a part time protection force for the villages and hamlets. The Civil Guard was a full time paramilitary group who were supposed to act as a reaction force within the province. In reality, both were under-trained, poorly equipped, and ineffective. Both did, however, give the province chiefs an armed force, which was not under South Vietnamese military control. Diem constantly pitted the military and civil administrations against one another. This created an environment in which neither one could achieve any measure of power or autonomy. The result was an inefficient,

uncoordinated civil military administrative system that kept Diem in power but would have dire consequences in the future.

One area where Diem was brutally effective was the initial destruction of Vietminh cadre, now called the Viet Cong. Ho Chi Minh left approximately 3000 political and 5000 military cadres in the south after regroupment. Diem began an anti-communist campaign in 1955. In 1956, his forces arrested over 20,000 suspects and sent them to reeducation camps. Suspects included anyone who had supported the Vietminh against the French, including non-communists. The arrests and violence continued and by 1957 the remaining cadre were simply trying to survive.<sup>11</sup>

In 1958, Le Duan, the North Vietnamese Central Committee Secretary for the Southern Region, returned from a secret trip to South Vietnam. He reported to Ho Chi Minh and the Communist Party leadership that the remaining cadre in the south could not survive much longer and would soon take matters into their own hands rather than waiting for instructions.<sup>12</sup> The Central Committee was forced to reevaluate the effectiveness of its strategy. Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap adapted the principles of Chairman Mao's revolution in China to the situation in Vietnam. This strategy was known as *Dau Tranh* or the Struggle. The strategy eliminated the idea of noncombatants and consciously incorporated civilians, including women and children, into the fight for independence.<sup>13</sup> The strategy contained two elements, the political *Dau Trahn* and the armed *Dau Tranh*. These two arms were always employed together and were in fact inseparable. Every action taken by the government, its military forces, and its population supported this strategy. Armed conflict by either small insurgent bands or conventional regiments had political effects that could be exploited. The soldiers and civilians in

North Vietnam, and the Viet Cong in the south, were thoroughly indoctrinated into the Dau Tranh strategy by trained cadre.

North Vietnamese strategy since the Geneva Accords emphasized the political Dau Tranh. As Ho Chi Minh was rebuilding North Vietnam after the first Indo China War, he actively discouraged armed insurrection in the south. Ho Chi Minh believed that the situation in South Vietnam was not right for a general uprising and that the main effect should be a building up of forces and infrastructure.<sup>14</sup> After Le Duan's report, however, it became apparent that it was time to place more emphasis on the armed Dau Tranh. The North Vietnamese established two organizations to expand the Ho Chi Minh trail and move men and supplies south. The central Committee also authorized the Viet Cong to conduct limited offensive operations against Diem's forces.

The effects were dramatic. Viet Cong actions against Diem's government increased significantly from 1959 to 1963. Newly trained and equipped Viet Cong units began to engage regular South Vietnamese army units, as well as, Civil Guard patrols. This increase in insurgent capability and the inability of Diem's forces to control the situation was highlighted by the battle of Ap Bac on 2 January 1963. Approximately, 300 Viet Cong held their positions in the face of seemingly overwhelming South Vietnamese army assaults and they escaped intact, leaving only three dead. The results of the battle and poor showing by Diem's forces would have a significant effect on the US policy toward Vietnam.

The communists employed the political Dau Tranh in conjunction with armed action in the south. The National Liberation Front (NLF) was established in December 1960. As Ho had done before, the NLF unified a variety of South Vietnamese factions

opposed to the Diem government. The southern communists, however, soon dominated the organization. Both the Viet Cong and the NLF were able to increase membership while harsh Diem countermeasures alienated much of the population and drove them towards the opposition groups.

The US military was disturbed by the South Vietnamese army's inability to counter the Viet Cong threat. In 1956, the US Military Assistance Advisory Group assumed the role of training Diem's forces from the French. The MAAG perceived the primary threat to South Vietnam was a conventional military invasion from the North. The US advisors organized, equipped, and trained the South Vietnamese armed forces in accordance with American military doctrine to counter this threat. Contemporary military logic held that a well-trained, conventional force could defeat an insurgency with minimal additional training.

By the early 1960's, the MAAG discovered that it needed to review its policies in Vietnam. First, as previously stated, the Viet Cong insurgency, not the regular North Vietnamese Army, was emerging as the primary threat to Diem's government. Second, despite US training, equipment, and advice, the South Vietnamese forces were clearly not ready to fight the Viet Cong. There were several reasons for this. As stated, the combination of Diem's mistrust and his loyalty-based promotions saddled the armed forces with weak mid-grade and senior leaders. This led to an ineffective chain of command with Diem frequently bypassing senior leaders and issuing orders directly to operational units. While personal loyalties did exist, there was a lack of unity of effort regarding their government and nation. This lack of unity existed within the armed forces and between government agencies.<sup>15</sup>

The American leaders in Saigon and Washington understood that the current political and military situation in Vietnam would have to change in order to defeat the insurgency. The question was how to effect the change. President Diem viewed the insurgency as a military problem. He realized that he had to separate the rural peasants from Viet Cong influence. His approach was to secure areas of the countryside and physically control the population. Many military advisors agreed with this “security first” approach. Several prominent State Department and political figures believed the strategy should be for the Diem government to institute basic reforms aimed at winning the loyalty of the peasants. This, they contended, would create more popular support for the government and lessen support for the insurgency. Above all, the Americans wanted Diem to adopt a clear, national counterinsurgency strategy.

Eventually, this national strategy became known as the strategic hamlet program.<sup>16</sup> The program evolved as a combination of US and Vietnamese plans. In late 1960, the country team in Saigon produced the “counter-insurgency plan” (CIP) for Vietnam. The goal of the plan was for Diem to streamline the civil military command structure and to create a national strategy, along with the required infrastructure, to defeat the insurgency.<sup>17</sup> In September 1961, the MAAG produced its own national counterinsurgency strategy plan. It was much more detailed than the CIP. The MAAG’s plan called for detailed intelligence to be gathered on specific areas, prioritized by date in the plan, to be followed by military clearing operations. The military would hand the secured area over to the civil guard and government representatives would develop the rural infrastructure. Eventually, the area would be secured by the self-defense corps and ultimately by the loyalty that Diem’s government engendered in the peasants. This

loyalty would be developed through positive government contact with the resettled population. The availability of medical care, schools, electricity, and security from the Viet Cong would offset the negative effects of resettlement.

Diem, however, was developing a plan of his own. In his quest to maintain a level of perceived autonomy from the US, Diem requested the British government send a team of experts to advise him on a counterinsurgency strategy. Sir Robert G. K. Thompson headed the team known as the British Advisory Mission. Thompson was an official in the British colonial government during the Emergency in Malaya. He led armed patrols against the MRLA early in the Emergency. He rose through the colonial ranks to become the last Secretary of Defense for the Federation of Malaya. It was while serving in this position that Thompson met Diem and at the latter's request toured Vietnam in 1960.

Thompson drew on his experience in Malaya and developed a plan for Diem in November 1961. The Delta Plan, as it was known, called for securing the rural populated areas. Thompson believed the key to success was offering the peasants a better life than the communists could. While acknowledging that the army would play a role initially in securing the area, Thompson placed greater influence on the role of the police. The police were the instrument for enforcing population control measures designed to ensure that the Viet Cong were unable to draw support from the peasants. The police, as a paramilitary force, would secure the area around the villages while the army pursued the insurgents in the jungle. Thompson believed that the resettlement of peasants would give the government the opportunity to improve the lives of the population. This would win the peasant's loyalty, which Thompson believed was the basis of a successful

counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>18</sup> The program, Thompson believed, should start small in an area with a relatively low threat from the Viet Cong. Thus, enhancing the likelihood of success.

Eventually, Thompson and the MAAG came to an agreement on the strategy. This was in part due to feedback from General Maxwell Taylor, President Kennedy's special military representative, who had spoken to Thompson and agreed with many of his views. Further support came from the State Department's Intelligence Director, Roger Hilsman, who produced "A Strategic Concept for South Vietnam" which was in line with both the MAAG and Thompson's plans.

President Diem agreed with the overall concept of strategic hamlets and in February 1962 established the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets (IMCSH). The group's primary purpose was to serve as a venue for Diem's brother Nhu to implement and control the program. Diem sought a strategy that would allow his government, with American financial support, to implement controls over the rural population. This was the key difference between Thompson and Diem. For the British advisor, peasant loyalty was the goal; for the Vietnamese president, population control was all that mattered.

Resettlement was not a new concept in South Vietnam. Diem and Nhu attempted a limited plan in 1959 of moving small groups into controlled villages known as "Agrovilles." The program was a disaster due to poor administration and peasant resentment at being forced to leave their ancestral lands and farms. The Agroville plan was abandoned with little to no success and problems encountered foreshadowed events that would occur soon after. Later a few province chiefs achieved some success against



Viet Cong infiltration by resettling small numbers of peasants into defensible hamlets. These programs, however, were limited in scope and the Viet Cong were able to draw support from other, more susceptible hamlets.

The South Vietnamese government with MAAG support began the Strategic Hamlet Program on March 22, 1962 with Operation Sunrise. This was the resettlement of parts of Binh Duong Province northwest of Saigon. A large portion of this area was under Viet Cong control and neither the MAAG nor Thompson favored beginning there. The MAAG wanted to conduct limited clearing actions closer to Saigon in order to build the confidence of the South Vietnamese Army. Thompson wanted to begin in the much quieter Delta region. Diem approved both plans for different reasons. With Operation Sunrise, he opened the avenue for American aid. By also approving Thompson's Delta Plan, he tried to show that the strategic hamlet program was not an American dominated effort.<sup>19</sup>

On the surface, Operation Sunrise was initially a success. The Viet Cong left the area in the face of overwhelming the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) forces. Construction began on the strategic hamlets and families moved either by choice or government coercion. One fact, however, was disturbing. Although over 200 families were resettled, only 120 men of military age were among them.<sup>20</sup> This indicated that a substantial amount of young men had joined the insurgency. Despite this, in August 1962 the IMCSH, at Nhu's instigation, proposed to Diem that the strategic hamlet program be instituted on a national level. Several other operations were launched and construction and resettlement were accomplished at a frenzied pace. In October 1962, the government-controlled publication of *The Times of Vietnam* magazine, announced

that the strategic hamlet program was the government's counterinsurgency strategy and Nhu was the guiding force. The US recognized the program as the long sought after national strategy for Vietnam.<sup>21</sup>

Statistically, the Diem government presented the program as a success. By the end of September 1962, approximately one third of the total rural population was said to be in completed hamlets. Diem's statistics, however, were misleading. The strategic hamlet program was out of control. The pace of the operations was much too fast. The Civil Guard and Self Defense Corps, still under-trained, had been infiltrated and intimidated. The Viet Cong frequently moved back into areas after government troops withdrew and regained control of much of the countryside. Furthermore, despite US money and equipment, construction was often slipshod and corrupt administrators withheld money from the peasants. The breakneck pace of the resettlement program caused inefficiency. This coupled with government insistence that the new hamlets be situated astride insurgent lines of communications, heightened peasant resentment and fear.

These problems were not an accident. It was later discovered that the man chosen by Nhu to oversee the program was a communist agent who intentionally directed the program to maximize peasant animosity. Albert Pham Ngoc Thao was a communist who fought with the Vietminh against the French. After the Geneva Accords, he remained in the South where he had to avoid Diem security forces as they arrested thousands of real and suspected communist agents. Thao's advantage was that his family members were well-known, devout Catholics. He came to the attention of Diem's brother Bishop Ngo Dinh Thuc. The bishop believed the former Vietminh could become an asset to Diem's

administration. Thao became a major in the South Vietnamese army and he trained the civil guard. In 1957, Diem sent him to Malaya to study British counterinsurgency strategy, including the resettlement program. During all of this period, he remained an ardent communist. He used Nhu's desire to see the program implemented, as rapidly as possible, as an opportunity to maximize peasant discontent. Thao pushed the resettlement effort at a pace that ensured hostility among the very people whose loyalty the government was trying to gain.<sup>22</sup>

The problems with the strategic hamlet program soon took a back seat to another crisis in South Vietnam. On 8 May 1963 government forces broke up what had been a peaceful, Buddhist celebration in Hue. In the end, eight children and one woman lay dead.<sup>23</sup> The Buddhist reacted with unexpected vigor and organization. The crisis took a significant turn when a Buddhist monk set himself on fire in protest of the Diem government. The American media had been notified and took pictures of the event in Saigon. The US population, including President Kennedy, was shocked and many questioned American support of the Diem government. Madame Nhu, the sister-in-law of President Diem, made insensitive remarks following the incident that exacerbated the situation. She referred to the incident as a "barbeque" and added "Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands."<sup>24</sup> This was a public relations disaster for the Diem administration.

The new US ambassador, Henry Cabot Lodge, took a hard line with Diem. Lodge began to hint that future US support would be tied to governmental reform. On 21 August 1963, Nhu's secret police, disguised as soldiers, arrested over 1000 Buddhists and middle class youth in the capital. Lodge told Diem that Nhu's presence in the

government would no longer be tolerated. Diem's sense of isolation and insecurity increased; he became more withdrawn and refused to dismiss his brother.

In Washington, debate continued over support for Diem in the face of the Buddhist crisis and increased Viet Cong activity. In a 2 September 1963 interview with Walter Cronkite, President Kennedy issued a stark warning to Deim. Kennedy said that there could not be a successful outcome to the counterinsurgency unless there were fundamental changes in the South Vietnamese government. He highlighted the lack of popular support for Diem and said, "policy and personnel" changes had to be made. This was a clear reference to the government crack down on the Buddhists and the overwhelming popular dislike for Nhu.<sup>25</sup> To complicate the situation, Nhu began to hint that he was making overtures to the communist North. In Saigon, Diem's generals began to plot an overthrow.

The situation was clearly spiraling out of control. On 1 November 1963, with US knowledge and implied approval, several of key Diem senior officers staged a coup. They gained control of the palace and found Diem the next day. On November 2, 1963, coup members executed Diem and Nhu in the back of an armored personnel carrier.

The death of Diem and Nhu marked the end of the strategic hamlet program as the national counterinsurgency strategy. What little effective administration there was had disappeared with the death of the program's architect and driving force, Nhu.<sup>26</sup> Smaller scale versions of the resettlement program, such as the New Life Villages, would be tried in the future without success. The lack of a national strategy, coupled with the obvious deficiencies with the South Vietnamese armed forces, set the stage for the expansion of the US role in Vietnam.

<sup>1</sup>Edward Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, (Boston: Boston Publishing Co., 1981), 109.

<sup>2</sup>George, C Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1996), 63.

<sup>3</sup>Edward Doyle and others, eds., *The Vietnam Experience: Setting the Stage* (Boston: Boston Publishing Company), 163-164.

<sup>4</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 148-150.

<sup>5</sup>Herring, 12-13.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 50,52-55.

<sup>8</sup>DA Pam 550-55. *Area Handbook for Vietnam* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967), 219.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 220.

<sup>10</sup>Doyle, *Passing the Torch*, 139.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>13</sup>Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of Vietnam* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1986), 215.

<sup>14</sup>Karnow, 237.

<sup>15</sup>Ronald H. Spector, *United States Army Advise and Support: The Early Years 1941-1960* (Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1985), 345.

<sup>16</sup>Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972), 148-149.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 149.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 148-149.

<sup>22</sup>Truong Nhu Tang, David Chanoff, and Doan Van Toai, *A Viet Cong Memoir* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1985), 45 - 47.

<sup>23</sup>Karnow, 279.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 281.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 290.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971-1972), 158.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MALAYAN COUNTERINSURGENCY MODEL

In this chapter, the author will define the Malayan model for counterinsurgency and determine to what extent it was applied to the strategic hamlet program in Vietnam. In order to show the extent to which the model was applied, two factors are considered. The first factor is the role Robert Thompson and Roger Hilsman played in applying the model to the strategic hamlet program. The second factor is how Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, each used Thompson's Malayan based plan to shape and implement the strategic hamlet program.

The author uses the term "Malayan counterinsurgency model" in this thesis to describe the strategy employed by the British during the Malayan Emergency. This strategy emphasized the role of the civil government over the military to defeat insurgents. The model included tactics and procedures ranging from population control measures to the unification of the civil-military chain of command. The principle contention of the model as applied in Malaya was that the government had to win the support of the population in order to defeat the insurgency. It is not enough to simply fight the guerrillas. The population, in this case the Chinese, were the primary source of insurgent support, had to be convinced that their best interests were served by supporting the government. The first step in this strategy was for the government to physically isolate the predominately rural population from the insurgents. This could be achieved either by defending existing settlements or by removing parts of the population to areas where defensible villages could be built. The government was active in these villages and strove to improve the lives of the peasants through access to medical and educational

facilities. Consequently, the peoples' impression of the government would begin to improve.

While the government was winning over the population, the military conducted supporting operations against the guerrillas in an effort to prevent attacks on the villages. The military also supported the training and equipping of a paramilitary force, whose members came from rural populations. Once properly trained, the civil guard would assume the responsibility for providing local security for the villages. The police forces, at both the national and local level, were essential for defeating the insurgency. They used their knowledge of the population to build an intelligence database on the insurgency. They also had the overall responsibility of enforcing population control measures designed to prevent contact between the insurgents and the population. These measures included issuing identification cards to control movement, and imposing curfews and food rationing. It was imperative that there was close cooperation between the police and the military in order to enforce these measures and isolate the insurgents. The Malayan experience clearly showed that population control measures combined with the efforts of the paramilitary forces were the essential elements in the defeat of the insurgency.

Thompson and the British Advisory Mission advocated the adoption of this model as a strategy to defeat the insurgency in Vietnam. However, the British appreciated the inherent differences between the Malayan Emergency and the situation in Vietnam. One difference was the external support the Viet Cong received from North Vietnam. Another was that the British colonial government was much more efficient than Diem's



government. Still, Thompson believed that the South Vietnamese could defeat the insurgency by applying the strategy proven in Malaya.

Thompson's strategy had significant influence in both Saigon and Washington. Ambassador Fredrick Nolting noted that "Thompson himself was very persuasive and he had considerable influence with President Diem."<sup>1</sup> Thompson submitted his "Appreciation of Vietnam 1961-1962" to Diem in late October 1961. The "Appreciation" was the result of the British Advisory Mission's survey of the situation in South Vietnam. Diem approved of Thompson's assessment and asked the British Advisory Mission to draft a pacification plan in order to translate the "Appreciation" into an executable strategy.<sup>2</sup> In November 1963, Thompson submitted a draft plan for pacifying the Delta region of South Vietnam. The plan emphasized the role of the civil administration, especially the police, in securing the countryside and winning the loyalty of the peasants. The military was seen as a supporting effort whose mission was to clear the insurgents from the area and remain in place to prevent their return.

Thompson's influence in Washington began during his visit to Saigon in October 1961 when he met with General Maxwell Taylor, President Kennedy's military representative. General Taylor and Walt W. Rostow, the lead State Department planner, were in Vietnam to assess the situation and to suggest ways for the South Vietnamese to defeat the Viet Cong with American support.<sup>3</sup> General Taylor shared Thompson's views on what the South Vietnamese government needed to accomplish in order defeat the insurgency. Thompson also sent Taylor a copy of his "Appreciation." In doing so, Thompson managed to get the Malayan counterinsurgency model considered by the decision makers in Washington.

Roger Hilsman met with Thompson in Vietnam in January 1962. The State Department's Bureau of Intelligence had recently finished an assessment of the situation in South Vietnam by comparing it to other insurgencies including Malaya. The State Department study contained many of the same conclusions as Thompson's "Appreciation." For instance, both assessments concluded that the Viet Cong drew the bulk of their logistical and personnel support from the local population, not from North Vietnam. Hilsman drew on his experiences working with guerrillas in Burma while with the Office of Strategic Services during World War II to formulate his opinion on how the military should be used against them. He believed that large-scale military operations were, at best, ineffective at locating and destroying insurgents. At worst, these operations could turn the local population against the government as their crops, houses, and even families were destroyed by military action. The study recommended that small, specially trained units be used to harass and ambush the insurgents. It was believed that by keeping the guerrillas occupied, other government agencies would be able to operate within the area to win the peasants' loyalty. The population would be trained to defend itself and eventually the area would be pacified. At this point, the government forces could move to another area and start anew.<sup>4</sup> This strategy was fully in line with the Malayan model. Both Thompson and Hilsman agreed that the most important step the Vietnamese had to take was to establish a clearly defined, unified chain of command to coordinate the activities of civil, military, and police authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Hilsman agreed that Thompson's Delta Plan provided the opportunity for the South Vietnamese government to establish and to implement a national counterinsurgency strategy. When Hilsman returned to Washington, he briefed President

Kennedy and other key administration officials on the virtues of Thompson's Malaya-based plan. As Hilsman reported: "The President was impressed with Thompson's ideas and agreed that this was the direction we should go in developing a strategic concept for Vietnam."<sup>6</sup>

President Kennedy was not satisfied with the strategy he had inherited from the previous administration and that his military advisers continued to support. The President believed that the key to defeating the communists in Asia was to harness the forces of nationalism by winning popular support for the government.<sup>7</sup> This was not being addressed under the current US strategy, which emphasized the military as the solution. The US advisers trained and equipped the ARVN to defeat an invasion by North Vietnamese forces. General Taylor's recommendations, following his trip to South Vietnam, were congruent with this strategy. The General recommended increased support for Diem's military, including additional aviation assets and intelligence equipment. The recommendations also suggested that more US forces be brought into country under the guise of helping with recent flooding in the Delta region.<sup>8</sup> President Kennedy urged his top-level planners to consider broader solutions in defeating the communist insurgency. In response, the Department of Defense created the Office of the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities. Also, a new presidential special group was created that included, among others, the Attorney General, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and Director of the CIA to consider the counterinsurgency issue.

The Kennedy administration also put pressure on Diem to institute government reforms, linking the South Vietnamese administration's ability to change with increased US aid. The Saigon government reacted with public hostility towards the US but quietly

began to make superficial changes so as not to jeopardize relations. The Thompson Delta Plan, now being championed by Hilsman, seemed to provide the opportunity for the Diem government to expand its base of support with the rural population, which in turn began to satisfy the American demands for reform.

The US Army was less than enthusiastic about the Malayan based strategy. Several factors were involved in the Army's resistance to Thompson's, and now Hilsman's plan. First the MAAG, which became the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in February 1962, wanted the ARVN to maintain an offensive focus. The American advisers believed that Thompson's plan was too defensive in nature. Instead of actively seeking out and engaging the insurgents, as the MACV wanted, the ARVN would be tied down defending the villages in so called clear and hold operations. The MAAG's September 1961 "Geographically Phased National Level Operation Plan for Counterinsurgency" agreed in principle that the South Vietnamese government needed to gain popular support. The plan also recognized that a strong civil guard was necessary for village security. The MAAG emphasized, however, that the ARVN was the main effort to defeat the Viet Cong.

The MAAG's September 1961 plan called for the government to organize the population in areas that the ARVN had secured after finding and destroying the Viet Cong. The MAAG also realized that the local population could be trained to resist Viet Cong infiltration after the ARVN left the area. Two examples of successful training of paramilitary forces were ongoing when the MAAG produced the plan. The CIA started training Montagnard tribesman as part of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG). The CIDG units designed to prevent the Viet Cong from operating in the local area and to

defend their villages against infiltration and attack. Within thirteen months, the CIA and Special Forces teams had trained and armed 38,000 tribesmen in over 200 villages. This isolated approximately 300,000 Montagnards from Viet Cong influence.<sup>9</sup> The Vietnamese also had success arming two groups of northern Catholics resettled in the South. Both the Catholics and the Montagnards were successful in resisting the Vietnamese incursion into their respective areas.

These programs highlighted the key role that paramilitary forces would play in Thompson's, and to a lesser extent, the MAAG's plans. However, the successes of the paramilitary training programs were not automatically transferable to a national strategy. The Montagnards and Catholics were both minority groups with strong leadership and a sense of community. Both had reasons to resist the Viet Cong. The Montagnards had an inherent distrust of all ethnic Vietnamese, who regarded the tribesman as little better than savages. The Catholics were obviously opposed to the communists, as they had been forced to leave their homes and move south during the Regroupment. The attitudes of these groups were not found in the vast majority of the Vietnamese rural population. Furthermore, the CIDG program was essentially an American effort that was only later expanded to include South Vietnamese Special Forces trainers.

Another factor that contributed to the US military's dislike for Thompson's and Hilsman's plans were that many American officers believed that the ARVN was the only force that could defeat the Viet Cong. General Lyman Lemnitzer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told General Taylor that the insurgency had expanded beyond the abilities of the police and paramilitary forces to control. The Chairman believed that strengthening the ARVN was the solution.<sup>10</sup>

The British Advisory Mission and the MACV began to work close together in order to overcome the differences between the two plans.<sup>11</sup> Thompson conceded a more aggressive role for the ARVN and realized that the military would not fall under the command and control of the provincial administration. The Americans agreed with the British over the need to establish these strategic hamlets and acknowledged the military's role in training and equipping the Civil Guard and the Self Defense Corps. This compromise weakened the impact of the Malayan counterinsurgency model. Unlike Malaya, the military effort in Vietnam was clearly not subordinate to the civil effort and there was still not a single, unified command to coordinate operations. Despite this, other aspects of the Malayan model remained intact. The two most prominent features were the need for establishing strategic hamlets, to include resettling rural populations if needed, and the requirement for a strong paramilitary force.

The agreement between the American and the British helped establish the preconditions for establishing a national counterinsurgency strategy for South Vietnam. President Kennedy was dissatisfied with the military dominated strategy he had inherited from the Eisenhower administration. This, combined with his own belief in the power of nationalism in Asia, led him to be receptive to Thompson's Malaya based strategy. Hilsman was extolling the virtues of this strategy at various agencies in Washington. The Pentagon's objections were largely overcome when the MAAG, and later the MACV, and the British Advisory Mission reached a compromise that resulted in Operation Sunrise. Agreement between the Americans and British was not enough though. In order for the strategy to be effective, Diem needed to accept and implement it on a national level.

There are three overriding factors that must be considered when examining how the Diem government adopted the strategic hamlet program as a national counterinsurgency strategy. First, the program had to be viewed as a Vietnamese, not American, strategy. The second was the desire to expand the government base of support into rural Vietnam, a population at best apathetic towards the Diem administration. The third was that the national strategy had to be executed in such a way that a potential political or military power base to rival the Diem government was not created. These will be considered in turn.

The North Vietnamese government had long portrayed President Diem as an American puppet. Given that his power base consisted primarily of the Catholic minority, wealthy landowners, and those who owed him allegiance for their positions in the government and military, Diem could not afford to ignore the implication of this propaganda. Many rural Vietnamese had begun to refer to provincial officials as “My Diem” meaning “American Diem” showing the link in their minds between the two governments.<sup>12</sup> Diem needed to distance himself from the Americans in order to establish his legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants. While he clearly needed US financial support, any national strategy adopted by Diem had to be viewed as Vietnamese lest Hanoi’s propaganda machine be given more fuel.

This led Diem away from the MAAG’s plan, in which American advisers would play a large role and toward Thompson’s plan. The British Advisory Mission placed less emphasis on the military, viewed largely as an American creation, and more on the civil administration. Diem, however, could not afford to alienate the Americans completely. The problem of balancing the need to appease the MAAG and appear independent largely

resolved itself as Thompson and the US advisers reached a compromise. The MAAG retained the offensive operations it wanted for the ARVN but also agreed to help train the Civil Guard and Self Defense corps. The construction of the fortified hamlets created an opportunity for the input of US aid.

It is significant to note that Diem did not wait for the British and Americans to come to an agreement. In February 1962, a month before Operation Sunrise, he approved Thompson's plan for pacification in the Delta region and ordered its immediate execution.<sup>13</sup> He also created the Inter-Ministerial Committee on Strategic Hamlets that month. Diem was clearly leaning towards the idea of using strategic hamlets as the basis for creating a Vietnamese led strategy.

Thompson's Delta Plan and Operation Sunrise, although somewhat distinct in concept and initial execution, became subsets of the overall strategic hamlet program. The program provided Diem with the opportunity to bring his administration into daily contact with the rural population of Vietnam. This met one of the fundamental tenants of the Malayan model that the government had to win the loyalty of the rural population. This loyalty would serve as a more effective defense against insurgent influence than barbed wire, moats, and the paramilitary forces. It also satisfied a continual American demand that the South Vietnamese government initiate some basic administrative reforms such as including more of the population in the democratic process.

Diem's brother Nhu became an important, if unsolicited, ally in convincing the South Vietnamese President to adopt the strategic hamlet program as a national counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>14</sup> Nhu realized that the Can Lao Party was losing the battle to the Viet Cong in the rural hamlets and villages.<sup>15</sup> Nhu saw the strategic hamlet



program as the opportunity to build the Can Lao Party in order to spread his and Diem's philosophy of "personalism."<sup>16</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine this philosophy in detail, it is impossible to ignore it because of the role it played in the strategic hamlet program. Douglas S. Blaufarb describes personalism as follows:

In brief terms, Diem and Nhu's personalism saw the highest value of society to be the human personality, which for its proper development required a social setting between Western individualism and the collectivism of the Marxists. The proper development of the human personality was seen as taking place in a communal context in which all elements of the community participated in a "collective advancement" in economic, social and cultural life. It also required an economic basis of land ownership for each unit within the community. It was vaguely democratic and collectivist in intent, with much emphasis on personal morality, strong family life, and the merging of individual goals into a common, communal purpose.<sup>17</sup>

Blaufarb contends that Diem and Nhu wanted to replace the traditional Vietnamese value system, with its ties to Confucianism and ancestor-worship, with personalism. The key is that the Malayan counterinsurgency model, with its emphasis on government contact with the rural population, provided Nhu the opportunity to spread the philosophy into areas where his party previously had little or no influence.

Nhu saw this opportunity as early as the summer of 1961. The province chief of Vinh Long was experiencing some success with grouping peasants into defensible hamlets, which was being done without significant support from Saigon. These hamlets, combined with an already robust, local administrative network, seemed to be effective in preventing the insurgents from exploiting the local population.<sup>18</sup> Nhu had already ordered the other province chiefs to begin developing strategic hamlets in their areas when Thompson submitted his "Appreciation" in October 1961. By January 1962, the President's brother had started a publicity campaign in order to spread the idea of strategic hamlets throughout the nation.<sup>19</sup> After Diem decided that the strategic hamlet

program was be the national counterinsurgency strategy, Nhu absorbed Operation Sunrise, Thompson's Delta plan and CIA programs such as arming the displaced northern Catholics into the Program.<sup>20</sup>

The last factor to consider in Diem's implementation of the strategic hamlet program as a national strategy was the South Vietnamese President's refusal to allow the establishment of a potentially rival power base. As previously mentioned, the Ngo brothers were keenly aware of the limited extent of their support. The coup attempts by the military early in his presidency created an inherent mistrust in Diem of his senior military leaders. Diem created a promotion system in which personal loyalty rather than performance was rewarded. By placing loyalists in key military and civilian posts, Diem sought to create a buffer against future plots. An inefficient civil-military command structure became a reasonable price to pay for the administration's security.

Consequently, there was no way the Diem government could make the sweeping bureaucratic and military changes Washington demanded as the price for US aid. The MAAG's plan, before the compromise with Thompson, gave the leading role to the ARVN. Even though the American advisers were not thrilled with the idea of training the CG and SDC, the influence the ARVN would gain in controlling these paramilitary forces was unacceptable to Diem. The balance of power would shift in favor of the military, which could provide a source of power for another coup. During the stepped up military operations, it was logical to assume aggressive leaders would develop within the ARVN. The MAAG would strive to reinforce their success and demand more streamlining of the chain of command, as well as, the removal of inefficient commanders. The latter could well be Diem appointees. The end result could be the emergence of a

US and an ARNV backed rival to the Diem government, something Diem could not afford to risk.

The Malayan counterinsurgency model with its emphasis on civil vice military primacy, espoused by Thompson and Hilsman, served to counter balance this threat. This effect was not intentional, but represented the realities of politics in Vietnam. By making the province chief the nominal, and Nhu the actual, execution authorities for the strategic hamlet program, Diem could prevent anyone in the military from gaining too much power. A further division of power was created because that many province chiefs were military officers. This meant that the province chiefs had to report to both the Ministry of the Interior, as well as, their military chain of command. Furthermore, the province chief had limited authority over other non-military officials (education, rural development, for example) working within the province.<sup>21</sup> To complicate matters more, Nhu's emergence as the driving force behind the strategic hamlet program ensured that there would not be an effective delegation of authority, regardless of the cost of efficiency.

President Diem and his brother Nhu seized the Malayan counterinsurgency model as a way not only to defeat the Viet Cong, but also to expand their influence into the countryside. The model was translated into an executable strategy in the strategic hamlet program. This strategy satisfied two Kennedy administration goals for South Vietnam. The first was that the South Vietnamese take the lead in the counterinsurgency effort. Second, the strategic hamlet program would also give the Diem government the opportunity to develop support among the rural population. By bringing the peasants over to the government side of the conflict, the forces of nationalism could be brought to bear against the Viet Cong.

The Malayan counterinsurgency model was not, however, adopted intact into the strategic hamlet program. The most significant omission was in not establishing a command structure that could unite the civil military effort. Although Nhu was clearly in charge of the strategy, the chain of command below him was convoluted. This contradicted the lessons learned in Malaya. There were two reasons for this. First the US advisers sought to ensure that the military remained the main effort. Second the Diem administration was unwilling to allow a streamlined command structure that could allow the emergence of a potential rival.

What President Diem did in fact was use the Malayan model to meet American demands for reform thereby continuing the flow of money and equipment. He adapted Thompson's ideas to create a strategy that was acceptable to the U.S and still maintained the appearance that the South Vietnamese government was in control of the situation. The strategic hamlet program appeared to satisfy these conditions as well providing the vehicles to spread his philosophy of personalism to the countryside. The reasons why this adaptation, and therefore the strategic hamlet program, did not succeed will be explored in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup>Fredrick Nolting, *From Trust To Tragedy: The Political Memoirs of Fredrick Nolting, Kennedy's Ambassador to Diem's Vietnam* (New York: Praeger Publishers), 54.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Defense, *The Pentagon Papers* (Boston: Beacon Press), 139.

<sup>3</sup>Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company), 226.

<sup>4</sup>Roger Hilsman, *To Move A Nation: The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy* (New York: Dell Publishing Co.), 425.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 438.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 423.

<sup>8</sup>Taylor, 242.

<sup>9</sup>Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era: U. S. Doctrine and Performance 1950 to Present* (New York: The Free Press), 106.

<sup>10</sup>Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, Inc.), 19.

<sup>11</sup>Department of Defense, The Pentagon Papers, 142-143.

<sup>12</sup>Chester L. Cooper, Project Leader, *The American Experience with Pacification in Vietnam* (Arlington, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis), 193.

<sup>13</sup>Department of Defense, The Pentagon Papers, 144.

<sup>14</sup>Nolting, 54.

<sup>15</sup>William Colby, *Lost Victory: A Firsthand Account of America's Sixteen-Year Involvement in Vietnam* (Chicago: Contemporary Books Inc.), 99.

<sup>16</sup>Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (London: Oxford University Press), 312.

<sup>17</sup>Blaufarb, 110

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>19</sup>Duncanson, 315.

<sup>20</sup>Colby, 115.

<sup>21</sup>Cooper, 169.

## CHAPTER 5

### STRATEGIC DIFFERENCES

William Colby, the CIA Station Chief in Saigon, believed that “the strategic hamlet program seized the initiative in the contest with the communists for the first time.”<sup>1</sup> American Ambassador Fredrick Nolting echoed this optimism: “In 1962 and the first five months of 1963, I was confident that the Republic of Vietnam was gradually winning the battle against Vietcong insurgency.”<sup>2</sup> These thoughts were representative of the initial, optimistic American and British views that President Diem’s government had a very real opportunity to defeat the Viet Cong by adopting the strategic hamlet program as a national counterinsurgency strategy.

This chapter will examine some of the inherent conditions that belied the American, British, and South Vietnamese optimism. The author will compare and contrast the conditions that existed in Vietnam to those that existed during the Malayan Emergency. Three areas will be examined. First, what were the differences in the respective rural populations? Second, what were the differences between the insurgencies? Third, how were the resettlement programs influenced by the bureaucratic institutions in both countries?

The most significant differences between the rural populations in South Vietnam and Malaya stem from their ethnic composition. Malaya was an ethnically mixed country. The Malays comprised the majority of the population numbering 2.4 million or 49.5 percent of the total population. Most Malays lived in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> The Chinese were the largest minority and they lived mostly in urban areas like in Vietnam; however, a significant number also lived in rural areas. There were about 1.8 million Chinese,

which represented 38.4 percent of the population. Approximately 500,000 Chinese, known collectively as “squatters,” fled to the fringes of the jungles to avoid the harsh Japanese occupation and lived as subsistence farmers. The Indians and Europeans, representing the second and third largest minorities, comprised 10.8 percent and 1.3 of the population, respectively. They lived largely on rubber plantations, in communities near the tin mines, and in urban areas. Thus, the rural population consisted of a Malayan majority and a significant Chinese minority.

Vietnam was much more homogenous than Malaya. The ethnic Vietnamese were the overwhelming majority in the country. The Chinese comprised the largest ethnic minority and lived predominately in urban areas.<sup>4</sup> The rural minority was comprised of two ethnic groups, the Montagnards and the Khmers. The Montagnards lived in the Central Highlands and numbered approximately 700,000. The Khmer lived in southwest Vietnam near the Cambodian border and numbered approximately 400,000. Thus, the rural population in Vietnam was almost exclusively Vietnamese. Consequently, it was that portion of the population that was the most likely to be both a source of support for the insurgents, as well as, candidates for inclusion in the strategic hamlet program.

The first difference between these rural populations is apparent when the ethnic make-up of the insurgencies is examined. Both insurgencies were nearly ethnically pure. The Malayan Communist Party and the Malayan Races Liberation Army, despite their inclusive sounding titles, were almost exclusively Chinese. The majority of the rural Malayan population did not support, and often actively opposed, the insurgency. Therefore, as a result of the rural demographics, the MCP drew support from the ethnic minority and had to avoid the majority. The Viet Cong, conversely, were

overwhelmingly Vietnamese. This meant the insurgents could live with and draw support from a rural population who from the same ethnic group.

It is important to note that there are physical, as well as, linguistic differences between Malays and Chinese. This allowed the colonial government to visually identify and separate the two groups. This fact was crucial to the government's victory over the insurgency. Even if the authorities could not positively identify who was an MCP member, they could, with reasonable certainty, identify those who were not. By excluding the Malays, Indians, and Europeans, the British were left with the Chinese and a small, primitive indigenous population living deep in the jungle. As the Emergency developed, it became clear that most of the Chinese living in urban areas were remaining neutral. This allowed the authorities to concentrate their efforts on isolating the rural Chinese from the insurgents.

Thus, the British were able to adopt a strategy designed to isolate the insurgents. The resettlement, population, and food control measures were limited, for the most part, to the squatters. Additionally, the government organized, trained, and equipped Malayan paramilitary forces to protect the rural population from insurgent coercion. The result was that the communists were forced to draw support solely from the rural Chinese, who were moved to resettlement villages and whose movement the police tightly controlled. This forced the MCP and the MRLA to divide into smaller, less effective groups and to take more risks to get support. The government's ability to isolate the insurgents was the key to eventual victory in the Emergency.

The conditions that permitted this isolation in Malaya were not present in Vietnam. In short, the Viet Cong looked and sounded like the Vietnamese peasant, who



represented the majority of the population. In most cases, the Viet Cong soldiers lived and operated near the villages where they grew up and their families still resided. The insurgents purposely decentralized their units to allow them to blend into the population, consolidating them only when necessary. Many full-time insurgents and cadre were also from the local area. Even if they came from North Vietnam, the lack of any distinct physical differences separating them from the local population allowed them to blend in as well.

This inability to distinguish between the Viet Cong and Vietnamese peasant greatly complicated the government's counterinsurgency strategy. It was difficult to screen the rural population for Viet Cong members or sympathizers as the rural population was being moved to strategic hamlets. Additionally, the sheer number of Vietnamese peasant hamlets allowed the Viet Cong the opportunity to draw support from a number of settlements, further frustrating the government's efforts to isolate them.

The second difference between the rural populations was that Malaya had to import food while the South Vietnamese produced enough agricultural products to have a significant export capability. Ethnic Malays produced the bulk of the agricultural products in Malaya; the Chinese squatters did not produce a large surplus. This situation was enhanced when the rural Chinese were resettled and the size of their farming plots was controlled thus reducing the amount of extra food they could produce. Also, the dramatic rise in tin and rubber prices during the Korean War drew many resettled Chinese away from farming to wage earning jobs on the rubber plantations, in the tin mines, or in urban areas. This further decreased the sources of food available to the

insurgents. These were significant factors in the success of the government's ability to cut off the insurgent's food supply.

In Vietnam, on the other hand, the rural population produced a surplus of rice. Rice exports were the leading source of foreign exchange. The Mekong Delta region was one of the most fertile areas in Indochina and the home to the majority of the agricultural population. The surplus made it more difficult for the government to enforce food control programs as in Malaya. Peasants could grow enough food to sustain their families and pay taxes to both the government and the Viet Cong. Resettling the rural Vietnamese population into strategic hamlets gave the government more control over individuals but moved the farmers too far from their fields. This created resentment because a significant part of the workday was spent walking to and from the fields and not farming.

The third difference between the two rural populations was their emotional ties to the land. The Chinese squatters that the British resettled into New Villages had only occupied their land since the Japanese invasion; consequently, their emotional tie to the land was not great. This is in stark contrast to the ethnic Vietnamese rural population whose family had been working the same land for centuries. The Vietnamese had a strong tradition of worshiping their ancestors and were very culturally attached to the land on which those ancestors were buried. Any government resettlement plan, like the strategic hamlet program, that forced the Vietnamese families to leave the land where their ancestors were buried would encounter stiff, ingrained resistance.

The last significant difference between the rural populations of Vietnam and Malaya was the number of displaced persons. Although the Chinese squatters in Malaya

could be considered displaced as they had fled the Japanese, by the time of the Emergency they had established themselves along the jungle fringes. The squatter's main impact on the government was that they represented a potential source of support for the insurgency. In Vietnam in 1960, over one-eighth of the population were displaced from their homes.<sup>5</sup> Among these were approximately one million Catholics who fled North Vietnam after the 1954 Geneva Accords. The Diem government bore the financial burden of resettling these people. Many were sent to newly established villages in the central highlands onto land the Montagnards considered tribal property. This aggravated the already poor Vietnamese-Montagnard relationship leaving the latter more susceptible to Viet Cong propaganda. Resettling the Catholics through government land grants also upset many rural Vietnamese.

Land reform was always a sensitive issue in South Vietnam, with a small percentage of the population owning the majority of the land, often as absentee landlords. Diem's administration passed a land reform ordinance in October 1956 aimed at redistributing some of the land to the peasants. However, by 1962 less than a third of the eligible rural population had benefited from the reforms.<sup>6</sup> The government's land grants to the displaced northerners, especially the Catholics, did not sit well with many Vietnamese peasants. They were paying rent as Diem gave free land to his fellow minority Catholics. This created a situation that provided fuel for Hanoi's propaganda effort to turn the peasants against the Saigon government and towards the communist cause.

The dissatisfaction among the peasants highlighted a significant weakness in Diem's administration. His popular support came primarily from wealthy landowners

and the Catholic minority. Given this, the South Vietnamese president was limited the extent of true land reform he could implement without the risk of alienating his already limited support base. Thus, Diem was unable to use the critical issue of land reform to win the loyalty of the rural population.

Just as there were differences in the rural populations in both countries, there were significant differences in the insurgent groups. The two most important of these were external sponsorship and the link between strategy and tactics. The maps of both countries reveal the most obvious clue to the level of external sponsorship. As a peninsula, Malaya, shares a land border with only one country, Thailand. The Thai government had no desire to see either a communist government to its south or the possibility that the insurgency could spark a similar effort in its country. Thus, Thailand closed its border and cooperated with British and Malayan efforts to isolate the MCP. The communist insurgents were only able to infiltrate into Thailand in small numbers and were never able to utilize the country as a place to rest, refit, and train insurgent forces. Insurgents were also not able to bring in significant support by sea. Britain's fleet and coastal patrols were able to prevent any resupply efforts by the MCP. The insurgents were only able to draw support from within the country. They relied on captured and cached weapons and ammunition. Food and other supplies, as well as recruits, had to come from within the population. These limited sources of supply allowed the British Colonial government to adopt a strategy that isolated the insurgents through the resettlement of the squatters to New Villages. The military could then locate and destroy the isolated insurgent pockets in the jungle.

The situation in Vietnam was exactly the opposite. South Vietnam was bordered to the north by the openly hostile Hanoi government and to the west it shared borders with Laos and Cambodia. Both of these countries had significant internal conflicts and could not be counted on to provide effective, continuous support to Diem's counterinsurgency effort. The Viet Cong, while utilizing the local populace as its primary source of support, could also turn to North Vietnam for assistance. Cadre, arms, ammunition, and food all flowed south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to the insurgents. Although this logistic support was not on the scale that would be seen later in the war, when tanks and artillery were introduced, it was enough to prevent the South Vietnamese government from being able to effectively isolate the Viet Cong. Cambodia and Laos also provided a sanctuary for the insurgents when government operations forced them out of their areas of operation. The result was that the Viet Cong were able to survive even after Diem adopted the strategic hamlet program.

The Vietnamese insurgents had three options in the face of decreased support from the rural population. First, the Viet Cong could infiltrate the new hamlets and work from within to ensure continued support. Second, given the expansive cropland, especially in the Delta region, the Viet Cong could draw support, either willing or coerced, from other hamlets that had not been part of the resettlement effort. This is particularly true in light of the haphazard implementation of the strategic hamlet program. Some villages remained untouched by the government's effort; thereby leaving them open as a supply source for the Viet Cong. Third, the insurgents could draw support from North Vietnam through Cambodia or Laos, especially if they were operating in the districts bordering these countries. The Viet Cong often used a

combination of these techniques to continue operations throughout the strategic hamlet program.

The North Vietnamese acted as more than an external sponsor for the Viet Cong. In reality, Hanoi relied on the Soviet Union and China to help equip and train its armed forces. The Viet Cong were part of Ho Chi Minh's overall plan to unite Vietnam under communist rule. The ability of the North Vietnamese to translate their strategy into Viet Cong actions in order to counter South Vietnamese initiatives like the strategic hamlet program stood in stark contrast to the MCP's inability to utilize the MRLA effectively against the British colonial forces. The MCP began the insurgency without a clearly defined and articulated strategy. This was due in large part to the rapid switch in strategies from seeking political power, predominately through infiltrating and controlling trade unions, to armed insurgency in the face of the impending federation plan. The MCP was unable to develop an effective strategy that could solicit support from ethnic Malays. This was particularly true when Templer, and the British government's Directive, promised independence for Malaya. The MCP could not offer anything to counter this promise. What little support the MCP had from the urban Chinese began to erode when it became clear that the Malays would support greater citizenship opportunities for the Chinese after independence.

The MCP was also unable to ensure implementation of the few strategic decisions it made. A good example of this is that it took over a year to disseminate the October Manifesto. This meant that many small units continued the practice of terrorizing the rural population to extort support after the MCP Central Committee, who realized this alienated the Chinese population, issued orders to switch to less aggressive tactics. The

combination of a lack of an initial strategy and poor communication with subordinate elements contributed heavily to the MCP's inability to expand its insurgency.

Conversely, the Viet Cong operated as part of a clearly defined strategy directed by the North Vietnamese government. This is not to say that there were not conflicting interests between the two. In the years immediately following the signing of the Geneva Cease Fire Agreement, Ho Chi Minh was fully engaged in consolidating his own power and did not provide significant support to the insurgents. The cadre who had remained in South Vietnam were nearly destroyed by Diem's forces. It was not until 1958 that Hanoi began to send replacement cadre and equipment to aid the Viet Cong. Additionally, the ties between the Central Committee and the Viet Cong cadre were strengthened, as illustrated by the insurgent response to the strategic hamlet program.

The Viet Cong did not challenge the South Vietnamese strategy directly. They relied primarily on North Vietnamese propaganda to discredit the effort by highlighting government abuses in carrying out the program. Hanoi directed the Viet Cong to maintain its units by exploiting pockets created when the hamlets were established seemingly at random.<sup>7</sup> The South Vietnamese and American officials interpreted this lack of armed opposition as the result of their aggressive military operations.<sup>8</sup> What was actually occurring was that the Viet Cong were executing their part of the overall strategy. The communists had agents placed in key offices to ensure the strategic hamlet program was executed at an overly aggressive pace. This was designed to stir up peasant resentment, as well as to bypass certain areas in order to create safe areas for the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong picked their battles carefully. They attacked hamlets they could not infiltrate, but did so in areas where the government forces were weakest. Indeed, in

the first six months of 1962, the CG and the SDC casualties accounted for 80 percent of all armed forces casualties.<sup>9</sup> The intent of the strategy was clear: let the government's own actions alienate the rural population; attack only those hamlets which could not be bypassed or infiltrated; and put fear into the hearts of the paramilitary when the attacks were executed.

The failure of the South Vietnamese civil administration to effectively implement the strategic hamlet program created the opportunity for the North Vietnamese plan to succeed. This failure is representative of a bureaucratic system that was so flawed at all levels that it was incapable of administering any national strategy. A contrasting example is found in the British colonial government in Malaya. The British had a vast amount of experience in both governing their colonies and the implementation of counterinsurgency operations. They also trained the Malays in civil administration with the eventual goal of Malayan independence. The colonial bureaucracy was reestablished soon after the Japanese surrender and many British Foreign Service officers reoccupied their former positions. Thus, at the outbreak of violence in June 1945, the colonial bureaucracy was in a strong position to execute a counterinsurgency strategy. Despite violent opposition, the government was able to implement a nationwide registration of everyone over the age of twelve. These photo identification cards played an integral part in the successful implementation of population control measures.

One of these control measures was the resettlement of the Chinese squatters into New Villages. The amount of intergovernmental agency coordination required to execute this operation was impressive. Neither the civil nor the military authorities alone had the assets required to conduct operations independently, so they had to work together. In



executing the resettlements, military and government officials took care to seek volunteers first. If the Chinese had to be moved against their will, they were allowed to bring their belongings on government provided transportation. The Chinese were also reimbursed for the houses they were forced to leave. This is not to say that the resettlement program did not have its shortcomings. Some New Villages were situated in areas with inadequate water and poor soil. There was also a shortage of trained Chinese speaking administrators to help run the villages.

The British and Malay civil servants, however, learned from their mistakes. This was the direct result of a clear line of bureaucratic communication from the lowest district level, through the individual states, to the capital. Lieutenant General Briggs strengthened this line of communication when he established the war councils, which united military, police, and civil administration efforts at each level throughout the country. General Templer furthered Briggs's effort by streamlining the bureaucracy and making it more responsive to the colonial government. The result was accurate reporting of the status of the resettlement effort up to the decision makers at the state and federal level. This enabled the government to recognize and correct errors and to reinforce success.

On the other hand, the Vietnamese bureaucracy was not prepared to implement the strategic hamlet program. As an institution, Diem's government did not have the experience necessary for long-term national level planning.<sup>10</sup> As previously stated, Diem enjoyed limited, popular support and he relied on economic and military aid from the United States. Diem's fear of potential rivals for power led him to promote and to

appoint loyalists rather than qualified personnel. The result was an inefficient bureaucracy.

Complicating this issue was the role Diem's brother, Nhu, played as head of the strategic hamlet program. Local government officials feared Nhu's power, as he controlled both the Can Loa Party and the Vietnamese Special Forces.<sup>11</sup> Few, if any, would question his directives or submit reports that could be viewed as unfavorable. This meant that there was not an effective means of addressing flaws in the implementation of the program or peasant grievances stemming from relocation. The pressure on province and district administrators to keep pace with Nhu's demand for rapid expansion of the strategic hamlets was enormous. In an attempt to give the appearance they were maintaining the pace, bureaucrats not only generated false statistics and reports, they overlooked significant sources of peasant discontent that were undermining the program's legitimacy. Many peasants were not paid for their labor in the construction of the strategic hamlets. Also, Diem's government allocated 1,000-2,000 piasters for relocated peasants to build a new home when the actual cost was approximately 20,000 piasters.<sup>12</sup> In many cases local officials withheld this money. They did so either for their own profit or to pay the money in installments, as a means of encouraging the peasants to stay in the new hamlet. Unlike Malaya, many of the peasants who were forcibly relocated were only allowed to bring what they could carry and watched as the ARVN burned their ancestral homes. Little, if any, official concern was given to the peasant's cultural sensitivity towards leaving the land where their ancestors were buried. What emerged was growing peasant animosity towards the strategic hamlet program and the

Diem government, two areas that the North Vietnamese propagandists were ready to exploit.

Additionally, Nhu's role as the head of the strategic hamlet program was, in and of itself, almost certain to ensure the plan's failure. His belief that maintaining the momentum of the program was more important than the details of implementation, led to gross inefficiencies.<sup>13</sup> These include bypassing areas that created safe havens for the Viet Cong and failing to provide adequate building materials and weapons leaving many hamlets defenseless. Nhu also overemphasized the role of "self-sufficiency and self-reliance" in the strategic hamlets.<sup>14</sup> An example of this is that the Self Defense Corps was often issued weapons for only six months. The government then collected them using the logic that the peasants would capture Viet Cong weapons and not need the government issued ones. In reality, many hamlets were subsequently left without the ability to defend themselves. The newly formed strategic hamlets were also expected to produce enough food to become self-sufficient in a short amount of time. Nhu failed to realize the extent to which the Viet Cong had infiltrated, not only the strategic hamlets, but also his own administrative apparatus.

A second difference between the Malayan and South Vietnamese bureaucracies was the latter's inability to adapt to the growth of the strategic hamlet program. In the Emergency, the overall efficiency of the government bureaucracy made up for a lack in the number of officials in the New Villages. In Vietnam, however, the inherently inefficient bureaucracy could only hope to keep up with the rapidly expanding resettlement program by increasing the number of civil servants to administer it. The problem was that there was not a pool of potential candidates to draw from. One study

General Taylor cited showed that only 10 to 20 percent of the population had the requisite education and administrative skills needed to be a productive government worker. The dilemma for the South Vietnamese was that 50 percent of these people were already working for the government.<sup>15</sup> Given that many of the remaining 50 percent would have been other key non-governmental professions such as physicians and teachers, the pool of qualified available workers was limited. When the government did find suitable recruits, they couldn't train the potential bureaucrats fast enough to maintain the pace Nhu established for the strategic hamlet program.<sup>16</sup>

The South Vietnamese, therefore, tried to implement the strategic hamlet program as a national counterinsurgency strategy with a bureaucracy that was fundamentally flawed in structure and they were unable to learn from its mistakes. When viewed from the outside, the progress of the program was impressive given the number of hamlets the government claimed were built. The reality was less impressive, of 8,600 strategic hamlets were reported as completed, only 20 percent were completed to the standard that the British and Americans expected.<sup>17</sup> Almost all of the hamlets, whether completed or not, required trained personnel to set up and administer them. The South Vietnamese bureaucracy could not train these personnel fast enough to keep pace with the program.

The last difference between the two bureaucracies was in the quality of reports submitted from the field to the policy makers. As noted previously, the British colonial government benefited from accurate reports from the districts where the resettlement program was being carried out. This allowed the government in Kuala Lumpur to implement effective changes to identified shortcomings.

This was not the case in Vietnam. The failures of the US and British advisers were two fold. First, both failed to accurately assess the inherent inability of Diem to institute the reforms required to implement the hamlet program. The advisers were not blind to the shortcomings of Diem's administration and realized that he needed to broaden his support base. However, hope that he would change his policies to attract this support, particularly in the rural areas, was in vain. President Diem could not change his administration and procedures significantly without causing his own downfall and land reform initiatives initiated to attract the peasants would have alienated the landowners. Establishing effective civil-military mechanisms to implement the program would have allowed a rival too much power.

The second failure was the consistent, inaccurate reporting on the progress of the strategic hamlet program. According to noted Vietnam authority, Bernard B. Fall:

The strategic-hamlet program was by far the most significant failure of the U.S. effort in Viet-Nam. It was a British failure as well, for the Thompson Mission should have openly opted out of it when it became clear that the Malayan pattern was not transferring successfully. Instead, it covered that failure with its own high reputation to the point where alarming reports to the contrary were-as this writer knows first hand-discounted on the basis of the "successes" reported by the British members even to the President in person.<sup>18</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Special Assistant to President Kennedy, wrote "Nolting and Harkins listened uncritically to his [Nhu's] reports and passed them back to Washington, where they were read with elation."<sup>19</sup> Thus, both the Americans and British provided inflated, overly optimistic reports. In March 1963, Thompson reported that the program had a "firm base" and there was "no doubt the momentum of the program can be sustained."<sup>20</sup> He did note that there needed to be an effort to eliminate the pockets being created by faulty implementation and that continual government presence in the hamlets

was required to prevent Viet Cong infiltration. The overall tone of the report, however, was optimistic. It was not until his September 1963 report that he admitted the program was moving too fast and lacked strategic direction. Thompson still believed in the eventual success of the program if there were greater cooperation between the civilian and military authorities.<sup>21</sup> The result was that Washington continued to put money and effort into a strategy that was clearly failing.

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<sup>1</sup>Colby, 102.

<sup>2</sup>Nolting, 56.

<sup>3</sup>Wang Gungwu, 193.

<sup>4</sup>DA Pam 550-55, *Area Handbook for South Vietnam* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1967), 62.

<sup>5</sup>DA Pam 550-55, 59.

<sup>6</sup>Cooper, 187.

<sup>7</sup>Thompson *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*, 137.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 130.

<sup>9</sup>Cooper, 190.

<sup>10</sup>Blaufarb, 122.

<sup>11</sup>Colby, 101.

<sup>12</sup>Cooper, 177.

<sup>13</sup>Colby, 166.

<sup>14</sup>Cooper, 176.

<sup>15</sup>Taylor, 236.

<sup>16</sup>Cooper, 198.

<sup>17</sup>Hilsman, 523.

<sup>18</sup>Bernard B Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis* (New York: Praeger Publishers), 382.

<sup>19</sup>Schlesinger, 507.

<sup>20</sup>Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus), 133-134.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 138-139.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted and evidence presented, the author concludes that the strategic hamlet program was destined to failure because of a misapplication of the Malayan counterinsurgency model. The South Vietnamese, together with their American and British advisers, did not adequately assess the differences between the two situations. The natures of the rural population, insurgencies, and bureaucracies combined to create a set of conditions that either facilitated or hindered the governments' effort. In Malaya, the ethnic composition of the insurgents and their limited support base allowed the colonial government and its efficient bureaucracy to isolate and, eventually, defeat the MCP. The British were able to accurately assess these conditions and employ an effective counterinsurgency strategy. The focus of this strategy was the resettlement of the rural Chinese population, which consequently isolated the insurgents from their source of food and recruits.

It was understandable that the South Vietnamese and Americans would try to learn from the British experience in Malaya. This is especially true given the influence of Robert Thompson with President Diem. However, the three parties failed to understand that the differences in Malaya and South Vietnam meant that the strategic hamlet program was destined to failure when applied in South Vietnam. The population, insurgency, and bureaucracy in Vietnam combined to create a set of conditions that favored the insurgents, not the government. The insurgents were indistinguishable from the majority of the population. It was almost impossible to isolate one group from the other. Compounding this problem was Diem's inability and unwillingness to change his



administration. Any meaningful reform would have eroded his limited power base and allowed for the development of a rival for power.

General Edward Landale once wrote: “The great lesson [of Malaya and the Philippines] was that there must be a heartfelt *cause* to which the legitimate government is pledged, a cause which makes a stronger appeal to the people than the communist cause. . . . When the right cause is identified and used correctly, the *anti*-communist fight becomes a *pro*-people fight.”<sup>1</sup> Diem, the Americans and the British were never able to win the rural population to this cause. This meant that the Viet Cong retained the initiative and the peasants were at best ambivalent towards Diem’s administration. The strategic hamlet program would not lead to the establishments of “white areas” in Vietnam as happened in Malaya. Diem could not offer his countrymen the realistic hope of a better future.

In reaching these conclusions, the author tried to use historical hindsight to glean lessons learned that could be useful to today’s military. The first lesson is that prior to committing US support to a foreign government, a detailed analysis must be done to determine the legitimacy of the government as seen through the eyes of the population. The study should also determine the strengths and weaknesses of the government and its ability to incorporate change. A key step in the process is defining effective mechanisms for the peaceful transfer of power within the government. The second lesson learned is that there is an absolute requirement for accurate, dispassionate reporting from the field to the decision makers. In many ways, this continues the initial analysis previously mentioned by providing accurate assessments on how US policies are being implemented abroad. There is also an implied responsibility for those receiving the reports to verify

important data and conclusions. This is especially true when the reporting element is closely linked to the event being reported and may have become unconsciously biased. Last, but possibly the most practical lesson learned, is that one cannot blindly transfer a strategy that has worked in one situation and implement it without change in another. Each situation has its own set of unique circumstances. Again, a detailed analysis is required to identify the commonalities and implement the appropriate tactics and procedures. In short, strategic models are useful but must always be adapted to each set of circumstances.

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur M Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (New York: Fawcett Premier Books), 899.

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